blood, drying

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blood, drying

by wolverton

Summary

Molly tasted faintly of mint and mostly of the eggs she had already taken a forkful of right there in the kitchen. Will wondered whether she could taste Hannibal inside his own mouth the way he did.

If she could, she did not say.

She never did say anything, really.

Enjoy the front row seat to the shitshow of epic proportions that is Will Graham's short-lived marital life. Sit back and relax as he navigates the complexities of love lost, betrayal, and the passage of time. Observe his total inability to escape memories which haunt relentlessly, unforgiving flashbacks, and—to top it all off—an unceremonious and wildly ill-timed comeback of his whilom tendencies to see and hear things which aren't really there. Or are they?

scarlet

Chapter Notes

no set posting schedule, but updates fairly frequently (approx. once every ten days or so). there'll be a very short hiatus after chapter 7, as it'll round off the first half of the fic (considering the act 1/act 2 division). the posting of the second half will commence when i plan the rest out in its entirety (as i said, very soon).

follow for potential updates and extra info on tumblr

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ACT I

Blackness isn't black. It is the last degree of reds. The secret blood of reds.
(Hélène Cixous, from Stigmata: Escaping Texts; *"Bathsheba, Interior Bible"*)

-

Tick.

A beat.

Tock.

(Repeat.)

The noise grated on his ears.

Will's hands fisted into the thin bedspread pooled around his waist, as though he could will the clock away if only he squeezed hard enough.

(No such luck; the mechanism kept ticking, the polished wooden casing kept gleaming in the pallid moonlight, the pendulum resumed its back-and-forth—determined in its continuous cycle of motion equally as much it remained determined in its torment of one Will Graham.

Left; Will inside an empty concert hall, save for the body displayed before him. The neck of a cello lodged down the neck of a different instrument entirely. *I wanted to play him, to create a sound.* Dust on his fingers. *I had to cut you open to get a decent sound out of you.*

Right; Will under a grey sky, cold waters lapping at his sand-ruined shoes, a monument of bodies reaching upward. Unearthed remains—*exposed, not desecrated*—each in its rightful

place, beautifully broken and disassembled, then assembled and made whole again.

Left; dry leaves crinkling under the pressure of Will's boots, the soil beneath soft, welcoming him as it had welcomed the unconscious bodies shallowly buried in single file. *They don't know they're dying; they don't need to.* As one with other organisms of this small ecosystem. Equally alive and equally conscious—that is to say, not.

Right; Will enveloped by the dark, pinned into place by a single intense strobe of light coming in from the ceiling. An iris of bodies surrounding him, still and sealed in place, yet moving all the same—a gradient. *What would be the last image fixed on this dying eye?* Looking up—blinding. *A dead eye, fixed and unseeing.*

Left.

Right.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

Left—*enough.*)

He shut his eyes, swallowed, winced at the sensation of his dry throat constricting around nothing. Forced his mind into a blank slate, stealing morsels of tranquility from the woman that lay beside him. Calm in her slumber, unmoving in the darkness. Will inhaled, greedily grasping for that repulsive fragrance of artificial peonies found in her favored shampoo; let those floral notes conceal the ever-present smell of blood that he could never quite get rid of.

He turned his head sideways, convinced he could hear his stiff neck creaking from the strain of the smallest of movements. Pried his eyes open with equal exertion. Molly's chest rose and fell in the languid manner of somebody in the throes of REM sleep. He bitterly envied the benignity of her dreams, perhaps even more than he envied her easy certainty that her night wouldn't be anything but peaceful.

Impulsively, Will bridged the gap between them.

Her body fit against his with all the suitability of a puzzle piece forced into a jigsaw it didn't belong to.

Her hair was coarse against his face when he pressed into it, peonies invading his senses, getting stuck in his nostrils, his throat. The sudden warmth come from their proximity was maddening, suffocating, stifling. His arm couldn't settle quite right around her, unsure how to hold her, unable to recall how he ever had done so in the past.

Even laying as close as two persons could, Will could not escape the notion that he was only embracing a warm body, with nothing else to it. He was starved for closeness, ravenous. He knew Molly to be the same. It had seemed like the perfect fit, at a point in time—yet in the two years they've been in each other's lives, one of which they've been married, neither has come any closer to being sated. The mutual hunger had only taken deeper root. Oh, what a comedy of errors; what a farce.

Yes, Molly the naïve, Will the misguided—soon in theaters near you.

-

Leaned against a counter, Will cradled a warm mug in his hands, savoring the rich scent and the steam that gently caressed his face. Eyes open, eyes closed, slow blinks matching the deep, steady intakes of breath. His chest expanded, trapping a little bit more warmth each time; warmth emanating from the coffee, from the stove, from the pan sizzling atop it, from the single ray of sunlight seeping through the tiny window above the fridge pleasantly warming the upper part of his left cheek.

He could almost ignore the deafening buzz of blood rushing past his ears. Could almost ignore the bitter bile in the back of his throat. (It mingled disgustingly with the aftertaste of some obnoxious brand of activated charcoal toothpaste with a dash of mint that Molly had bought in a vain attempt to undo the effects of coffee overconsumption and decades-long nicotine addiction.)

Yes. A lot of things could be almost-ignored for a few rare moments; Will would take what he could get.

It was still early; Molly would not wake for some time yet. (He glanced at the small digital clock built into the oven, at the blinking 05:46 made out of green dashes. He hadn't yet adjusted it according to the daylight savings, meaning that in actuality it was just over a quarter to seven.)

He finished the leftover coffee (about half a cup) in one tremendous gulp, throwing his head back as he did (half-certain he was only imagining the crack of his spine.) Turn off the burner; scoop a portion of the eggs and bacon into a plate, put away the rest for his wife and the kid—easy enough. Sunlight caught onto the exposed blade of a knife laying by the sink. Will took a seat at the table.

Molly pranced into the kitchen at the expected time—Will covertly glanced at the clock which read 06:11, thus a little past seven. As always, her greeting was more enthusiastic than his own, but she remained unfazed. Perhaps she had gotten used to the general air of gloom Will constantly projected. Perhaps she preferred pretending that Will's subtle rejections weren't what they were. Whichever it was, it did not stop her from kissing him when she approached the table.

Molly tasted faintly of mint and mostly of the eggs she had already taken a forkful off right there in the kitchen. Will wondered whether she could taste Hannibal inside his own mouth the way he did.

If she could, she did not say.

She never did say anything, really.

Silence enveloped them.

Walter trotted into the kitchen through the backdoor with an entourage of four-legged furry creatures swarming him from every which way, all of them drawn doubtless by the smell of freshly cooked breakfast. While they flocked to their filled bowls, Walter took a seat beside Molly (who sat across Will.)

They had adopted this configuration a long time ago—back when Walter was younger and shier and preferred the safe proximity to this mother over risking closeness to Will without a barrier between them. If anything, Will admired whatever primitive instincts stirred in the boy and made him so wary, and all the same wondered what had gone wrong in the long process of human evolution that determined Molly wouldn't be in need of the same.

Of course, Will would never hurt the boy—has never hurt the boy.

This did not matter in the grand scheme of things.

Molly, as ever, broke the silence. "Wally has a recital coming up."

Will speared a strip of bacon, taking a moment to observe and appreciate the fat rendered to perfection, before bringing the fork to his lips. Perfectly smoky and salty. He thought the Americans farmers and laborers of the early 20th century were rather onto something when they took to popularizing this particular dish. Eggs, then, scrambled and impossibly fluffy, speckled with peppers and herbs—ah. Light and creamy and melting in his mouth, positively delightful… there was undeniable loveliness in their simplicity. He took another sip of coffee, the mug now half-empty, licking his lips to savor the taste. (Will had never before much cared for the quality of the coffee he'd drunk—as long as it wasn't decaf and as long as it was bitter enough to shock him into the next week, he wouldn't complain. However, Molly had gone out of her way to purchase a coffee machine some time ago—a frivolous expense if he'd ever seen one, sorely tempting him to chuck it through the window with each maddening buzz, beep, whirr, click, clack, clunk, clatter and rumble. It'd grown on him, however.

It had all happened on a perfectly unassuming morning this past December. He'd come downstairs, a blanket across his shoulders, feet socked (a rarity—it truly was dire out there, a tremendously cold winter had been upon them), and found that they were all out of his regular coffee. Driven by the chill and a relentlessly unforgiving caffeine addiction of his own, he'd given up on his petulance and childish spite—and just… used the damn coffee machine, even gave the capsules stashed in a small basket beside it enough consideration to select a particular taste rather than grabbing blindly (it'd been *Ristretto*).

The rest… well, was history. He's been a changed man since.)

"Wally—"

"I heard."

Will's eyes flickered upward, meeting Molly's for a split-second. Just shy of an acknowledgement, enough to placate her. Somewhat.

Molly's voice held onto a cheerful note, though her eyes betrayed her. (Eyes tended to do that.) "Well?"

Will laid down the utensils, looked up, graced her with his full attention. Even before he'd made her his wife, Will had known Molly was one to wear her emotions on a proverbial sleeve, each micro-expression she couldn't control of hellbent on betraying her innermost turmoil. The crease in her forehead, the knitting of her eyebrows, the way the corners of her mouth drooped downward, jaw stiff with clenched teeth (a decidedly unfortunate tendency in the ways of dental aesthetics that she so cared for)—it all spoke, no, screamed discontent and frustration.

That, though? Anybody could read that. No, Molly could be the most apt person at maintaining a poker-face, and her eyes would still damn her.

They hadn't been *bright* in a long time, but seemed even duller than usual as they bore into Will's. Naturally grey, now even more clouded over, as though they were two puddles frozen over, streaked with misty tendrils of an early morning fog.

Bright and sparkling, dancing with an inner radiance, effortlessly lighting up her face? *Happy. Content. Delighted.*

Raindrops on a somber day, a light faded, thunderous clouds gathering in the horizon, bleeding into the dusky skies? *Sad. Gloomy. Irritable.*

Brushstrokes of silver and charcoal melded together, thick dark smoke streaking a pale sky, the barest glimmer of stars behind a curtain of clouds? *Passionate. Determined. Intense.*

Frozen puddles? Morning fog? In Will's mental chart, that particular imagery could be associated with nothing but *dejected, frustrated, disappointed.*

"Will?" Molly's voice cut through his musings, bringing him back to Wolf Trap, Virginia—from wherever in his head he'd gone to. "Are you even listening to me?"

He shook his head gently, the motion disturbing a lock of hair that now fell over his eyes. With little trouble he could recall over a dozen separate occasions of this happening, and in each of those instances Molly's hand would be right there, straight away, tucking it back behind his ear or simply brushing it out of the way. She kept her hands to herself now. Will blew the curl away carelessly.

"Of course."

He could see it in the set of her jaw that she did not buy it for a second. Will's saving grace was Walter's presence.

Molly was the champion of *Think Of The Children.* She might've coined the term herself, far as Will was concerned. If she hadn't, then surely she was its most ardent follower, its most relentless apostle.

To her credit, Walter *has* never heard them fight.

Almost fight, perhaps. Dance on the precipice of a fight, flirt with an argument, fan the flames.

Almost.

Molly the pacificator (*not* pacifist, generally speaking) repeated what she'd presumably said while Will had been busy losing himself in her eyes (if only that were as romantic as it sounded). "The recital—it's coming up in about a week. I thought we might refresh our wardrobe for the occasion."

Will opened his mouth, though before he could actually speak his mind, Molly turned to Walter. She suggested he check on the dogs again. Walter didn't seem to need to be told twice, leaving the table without nearly enough argument about being told what to do, for a boy his age.

Will did her the courtesy of waiting until the boy was really out of earshot.

"Refresh our wardrobe? It's an elementary school recital."

"It's important to Wally."

He ought to be the one dressed up, then. Will did not say this; it would have sounded horribly petulant even to his own ears. "I wasn't aware Walter has suddenly become a fashion aficionado. I do so applaud his newfound devotion to sartorial perfection—I know just who he'd get along with."

Will was self-aware. In fact, if he'd ever had anything going for him, it was the abundance of self-awareness he possessed. Really, it was necessary so as to make somebody like him at all bearable, palatable.

However, he did not need an *abundance* of it to know when flirting with an argument became a full blown romantic entanglement of the worst sort, which is to say: he'd pushed it.

The stare Molly had leveled him with was stony enough to qualify for Mt Rushmore.

There was something unbearably ugly lurking just below his surface, nipping at the underside of his skin. Something that has grown stronger since his days on the wrong side of BSHCI's bars. Something that did not allow him to back down and tuck his tail between his legs, not like he used to; something that knew it was wrong and still bared its teeth. An unstoppable force and an immovable object all at once.

He stared back at Molly, unwavering.

Molly stared harder.

Her nails pattered against the polished wooden table like rain against glass; for a moment, Will could imagine them growing, curling into claws. He kept his anger in his chest, but Molly kept hers in her hands.

Will licked his lips.

He could just about taste the ever-repressed desire to sink them into his chest that permeated the air, he could just about feel their scrape against his heart. He wondered whether she could feel it beating inside her closed fist, whether her hand felt warmed by the blood that gushed out.

The moment was over as soon as it began.

A scrape of the chair against hardwood floor, a gust of air as she stood up. “I will get you something presentable, and you will wear it.”

She left the dining room.

That was that.

Chapter End Notes

i don't wanna see any will apologism in the comments fr he's being Unspeakably Rude & we should act like it.

vermilion

Chapter Notes

massive, massive thanks to @Poljupci, who held my hand during the first half of the making of this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tick.

A beat.

Tock.

(Repeat.)

Will's eyes shot open. The tall, imposing figure in the corner of his bedroom was tall and imposing. Its chimes reverberated throughout the space; they were loud, and he couldn't quite decide whether the echoes travelling through the hushed darkness were only made more prominent due to the absence of daytime distractions (the sort of constant background noise one is used to and never takes heed of until it's gone)—or whether his hallucinations have turned auditory.

The thought did not induce a sort of fear and uncertainty he would have expected; his amygdala remained utterly inert, either unconcerned or totally slacking off. On a smoke break, perhaps, leaving Will's consciousness to its own devices (as if that has ever brought anything positive.) And now? What was Will without his fear?

A thought for another day.

Will absently ran the tips of his fingers down his bare arm, the lightest of touches. He watched gooseflesh form in their stead. There was no trembling pulse, no adrenaline surge. The primal instinct that would have followed suit was nowhere to speak of. He didn't think he'd quite get used to not feeling like a prey animal.

He looked back to the clock.

It was as though it beckoned him; each tick and tock waking within him the inexplicable desire to get up and approach. A shuffling, the coolness of the floor against his feet—he stood before it before he knew it. Hands reached out to touch, to lay themselves against the wooden casing; you wouldn't be able to tell, not in the darkness, but Will knew it must be cherry, what with the distinctly reddish hue to the brown wood. It was thick, too, real nice; Molly's family, whoever she had inherited this heirloom form, have certainly had it for more

than a couple generations. It wasn't any of that cheap modern shit, no layers of plywood stuck together trying to sell the illusion of something high-end.

Will's gaze traced the lines and curves adorning the clock's surface, his hands following suit to touch. He ran his fingers along the graceful vines, pressed the pad of his thumb into each petal of each intricate floral motif blooming across the wooden canvas; let his eyes linger on the creatures emerging from the depths of the wood, cautious deer and birds poised for flight blending seamlessly into the intricate patterns.

It took his breath away; he hadn't realized he'd been panting.

He pressed his forehead against the glass which protected the clock-face, relishing in the coolness against his warm skin.

-

As promised (or threatened, up to interpretation), a white dress shirt greeted Will as he stepped into the bedroom (which was now void of Molly, feeling oddly spacious for it.) He did not think himself a man with much to be grateful for in life, although at the moment, he found himself feeling something damn close to it—after all, he did not need to suffer headache-inducing fluorescent lights, the overwhelming variety of clothing, ceaseless chatter, ill-fitting store music, and the sheer intensity of smells: a cacophony of body-odors and polyester stench and the general staleness of air that clung uncomfortably in his nose for hours after the fact.

There was also a petty little voice inside his head which wouldn't let up on the idea that if he didn't *want* the shirt (which he didn't), he shouldn't be the one obliged to get it. And, if Molly saved herself the hassle of having to drag a reluctant husband through the bustling mall—all the better for the both of them.

The shirt was borderline blindingly white as he put it on, sliding each arm into its sleeve, shrugging it on, and buttoning it up. It made him look even paler, fucking fluorescent (just like those lights he'd feared facing), and it was… utterly unflattering. Yes, maybe most of his old 'white' shirts have gone a little eggshell, a little merino, but at least they didn't make him look as ghostly as he generally tended to feel. Maybe most of what he'd consider his *Nice Clothing* was a little worn and frayed around the edges—but at least they didn't make him look as though somebody put a bow on the rattiest mutt in the pound and tried to pass it off as a show dog.

God, he sounded just like daddy.

Will smiled wryly at the thought of what Will Graham Sr. might as about this. Some choice words, no doubt; he'd work himself into sweat at the thought of purchasing a replacement for something that didn't even have a hole in it. (And even then, he knew how to mend; taught his boy, too.)

But, daddy would never get out of the habit of going through life with a single suitcase-worth of personal possessions, even after so many years that he's been decidedly less nomadic and with a roof over his head. In fact, Will expected that the suitcase in question would remain

unpacked—or packed ahead of time, depending on how one decided to look at it—forevermore.

Will did have a terrible habit of following in his old man's footsteps—but, not today.

The shirt was fine.

Thankfully, the pants weren't such an issue; there was a pair in his closet he'd only worn on two occasions, and currently sat (neatly pressed) after not having been touched since Molly put a ring on his finger. A pair of socks and a belt later, he tucked the shirt in—all ready to look unnecessarily overdressed for the occasion.

Will looked back at the full-length mirror mounted on the wall beside their TV. Subsequently, he ground to a sudden halt.

Dark stains, varying in size, began blooming across the white expanse, and it took Will's trained eye a laughably short while to understand exactly what he was seeing. A millisecond following this realization, the stains shifted from dark to crimson, and, really, they did not appear to be stains at all any longer—the blood that had gathered beneath the fabric was beginning to soak through, spreading in size and saturating the surrounding area.

He squinted at the mirror, scrutinizing the sight with an almost inappropriate lack of distress. He slowly raised a hand, pressed his fingers against the biggest splotch, right there on his abdomen (he could feel his scar burning—though the pain was secondary to the shock). Removing it, it came away wet and bloody. It could not be real, yet everything pointed to just that.

Will shut his eyes.

Will counted to ten.

Will counted a little longer.

Will looked back at his reflection around seventy-nine.

The shirt was clean, white. A sigh of relief.

He looked at his hands; they were the opposite.

A short trip to the bathroom.

When he put his stained hands under the tap, the water ran clear. Will tried soap, which helped a little, then a loofah (he didn't have much to choose from on the spot, alright?) just to be safe. The hot water was relentless in scorching his skin, made raw by the rigorous scrubbing. Each nerve howled with the pain, each felt as though it was on fire.

When he finally pulled back, white-knuckling the sink in an attempt to ground himself, he gave himself a few seconds to gather his bearings. Deep breaths, more counting, all of that. He looked at his hands when they stopped trembling.

They were red, yes, though decidedly differently than before.

There was still blood under his fingernails. He heard the front door slam, the jingle of keys. No time—perhaps Molly wouldn't notice.

-

Molly did not notice. Nobody did, really. Not even Walter.

This did not relieve as much as it possibly should have, not when it pointed to something Will most definitely did *not* want to entertain, not again.

The drive to Walter's school was uniquely agonizing, what with Will being even more tightly wound than usual. It was spent in an absolute silence, which was mostly typical, although Molly kept tossing furtive glances Will's way. Worried, perhaps, or judgmental, or weirded-the-fuck-out-by-her-freak-husband—all equally likely, not that Will could tell which one. He was too busy staring blankly ahead, attempting to evenly divide his brain power between figuring out what *that* whole thing was all about, and sitting still enough not to wrinkle his clothing.

Surprising absolutely nobody, Molly took on the chief of the burden as far as socializing with other parents went. To say that he preferred to be seen and not heard would border on disingenuous, as he most certainly wouldn't be *seen* either if it were up to him—but, considering it was not up to him at all, he settled on speaking as little as possible while standing tastefully close to Molly, who seemed content to plough through the thick of their interactions while latched onto her man's arm. It was mostly inane chatter revolving around the kids and their respective performances, with the occasional unrelated gossip making an appearance (apparently, some Mr Reinhardt was currently in hot water with the school administration due to multiple parental complaints about several instances of unnecessarily graphic frog dissection, and another Mrs Hamilton was given the boot, allegedly due to an embezzlement of school funds—though the details were as yet quite murky on that one. Enthralling stuff, really. Not.) Will had just enough social aptitude to politely interject every so often with a few non-phrases—ranging from "right" to "yeah" to "yup" to "sure is" to "no kidding"—or perhaps regale whoever had approached them with a noncommittal hum or two, a smile if he felt generous enough (he rarely did.)

Plunking his ass down onto one of the uncomfortable, plastic, patio-furniture type chairs felt like a victory. The auditorium still buzzed with noise, albeit hushed, which only ceased as the lights overhead dimmed. The curtain drew back, revealing a group of children, standing single-file. Despite himself, Will's eyes searched until they landed on Walter. Outwardly, he didn't actually seem very nervous—though Will could see the hand stuck into his pocket, moving (fidgeting.) Suddenly he could recall all of his own failed performances from his youth (all those times he'd blundered and fumbled his words or lyrics, or been too anxious to get up on the stage at all), and began hoping Walter took after his parents in this regard.

Or this would be *very* awkward to watch, indeed.

Molly didn't seem to be sharing his concerns; Will could see her in his periphery, eyes sparkling and trained on the stage. She was bursting at the seams with both pride and

anticipation, as though she could simply not contain them within the boundaries of her body. Will caught himself feeling deeply envious of both Molly and Walter, for different reasons entirely.

The recital was off to a decent start. There were heartwarming piano solos, spirited group dances, and even a decently amusing skit that brought laughter throughout the auditorium (to be absolutely fair, the standards for comedy among seven-to-ten-year-olds was very low). There was reasonably lively applause following every act; Will noted that, perhaps unfairly so, the slightly weaker performances seemed to be awarded with a touch more enthusiasm than the rest. Then he reminded himself that these were merely children whose confidence was as brittle as dried leaves, and proceeded to give himself a good mental scolding for it. He made sure to clap a little louder after the fact.

Walter did well.

The boy had prepared a monologue (the little overachiever) from J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan. He held his own well enough—more than well enough, really. The kid had a good stage presence. He wouldn't have guessed it. Then again, this was nothing like the Walter he'd see at home.

"But sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to have a home, a family, and someone to love," declaimed Walter, with disturbing conviction. "To feel the warmth of a mother's embrace and the protection of a father's watchful eye. But then I remember that in Neverland, I have my Lost Boys, and together we create our own family."

Molly leaped to a standing ovation. Will felt mildly sick to his stomach.

-

Will chose to walk home. At this point, Molly didn't even question it.

The blood encrusted under his fingernails remained.

-

Tonight was his turn to take the dogs out, which was just as well. He'd missed it. He'd considered taking the chore on as solely his (as it had always been), but discarded the thought almost right away. Walter loved the dogs, and the dogs loved Walter. He wouldn't encroach on their time together all because of his selfish longing for solitude.

Oh, how he longed for it, though. Selfishly.

The moon hung high in the sky as the pack of them trickled out of the house. Noses sniffed the air, tails wagged vigorously—as if this was the first and the last time they'd see the outside. Still, their excitement was somewhat contagious. Will let a smile settle on his lips and linger there, as he leisurely walked behind the pack which had by now dispersed. He could see Max the farthest ahead, periodically breaking into an energetic sprint; Buster, desperately trying to keep up with his longer-legged companions; Harley, sticking her nose

into every bush; Winston, apparently torn between burning some energy and falling back with Will (somewhat comical.)

Will felt a little more clear-headed and, dare he say, rejuvenated, upon his return to the house. After seeing the dogs to their respective beds, he quietly went about doing his nighttime routine (Molly already seemed to be in bed, alongside Walter—how long had he been out?) He brushed his teeth in the kitchen sink for the fear of loud plumbing waking anyone in the house. There was still blood under his fingernails. He headed upstairs.

Molly was a pretty firm sleeper (a logical conclusion given the way she slept through Will's nighttime extracurriculars without a care in the world). She didn't as much as stir as Will slid into the bed beside her.

His muscles pleasantly ached once he found himself in a horizontal position, and given his general exhaustion (this *was* an exhausting day), he dozed off rather quickly.

-

But unfortunately, not for long. Never for long.

In the hazy realm between wakefulness and sleep, Will's eyes fluttered open. For the umpteenth night in a row. At this rate, Will felt comfortable saying goodbye to ever having another good night's sleep; he simply seemed predisposed to waking at odd hours only to see and hear things that weren't really there—encephalitis not required.

Sitting up, he automatically looked to the corner of the bedroom. His eyes widened.

The tall, imposing figure in the corner was tall and imposing; only, the clock was nowhere to be found.

"Hello, Will."

Chapter End Notes

mildly fun fact: both chapters, entirely unintentionally, are 2,492 words long

crimson

Chapter Notes

> so, somewhat unplanned-ly but not unexpectedly, this fic has somewhat run away from me, and is shaping up to become a lot longer than i had originally intended it to be. i don't have much else to say, expect that the pacing will slow down ever so slightly, and some things that i'd originally planned to leave up in the air will need to become more established and actually paid attention to (such as will's job - which we touch on here). i'm planning on introducing more characters (instead of being vague as i'd been so far), and truly carefully covering about a year of will's life - up until his meeting of hannibal in the bshci. i'm a little intimidated, and i mostly just really hope this lives up to my incredibly high self-imposed standards (lol). anyway, that's about it, i hope it's an enjoyable read.

There he stood, bathed in white and silver hues of the moonlight flooding in through the window. The doctor approached the bed, and Will was shocked he had the presence of mind to stay rock-still, and not flinch—as if this was Jurassic Park and Hannibal was some kind of fucked up iteration of the T-Rex. If he stayed still enough, maybe he wouldn't be seen (He could only hope that he wouldn't share the fate of Donald Gennaro.)

The lines between sanity and madness, between friend and foe, blurred in the shifting shadows of the room. Will noted that Hannibal did not cast one.

Was Hannibal dead?

No.

Will would know, wouldn't he?

He wasn't sure how; it wasn't as though Chilton cared to keep him on speed-dial, wasn't as though Alana wouldn't think that he'd be better off remaining ignorant of the good doctor's fate.

There was really no rational way—and yet.

He'd *know,* okay?

Just when Will almost reached the conclusion of his inner debate, Hannibal—or Not-Hannibal or Apparition-Hannibal or Hallucination-Hannibal (but certainly not Angel-Hannibal, for more than one reason)—spoke up, for the second time.

"Long time no see." His head was ever so slightly tilted, a self-satisfied cat-like sort of smirk playing about his lips.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Will whisper-shouted in lieu of a reply, scrambling out of bed with abysmally little grace. The sheets tangled around his ankles and he tripped, crashing unceremoniously into the wall and haphazardly grabbing onto the windowsill for purchase. Heart lodged in his throat, he looked back at the sleeping Molly, who groaned but didn’t wake (a fucking miracle, given the ruckus.)

He marched out of the bedroom, shutting the door as noiselessly as possible. He had a sneaking suspicion that Hannibal would not be evaded by putting a mere door between them. He was right. The moment he looked down the expanse of the hallway, his eyes once more locked with Hannibal’s.

Will couldn’t help it; he looked around erratically (feeling entirely too much like a child about to be caught with his hands down the cookie jar and entirely too little like a man in his 40s with plenty of agency to hallucinate in the comfort of his own home, damn it), a breath held in his throat, listening for any movement from any other part of the house. Every little creak of the floorboards chased fissions of anxiety up his spine, every little slam of the shutters as the wind weaved through them made him flinch.

What was that about not being a prey animal? Right.

He stubbornly looked back at the predator.

Hannibal regaled him with one of the more inscrutable looks in his repertoire, accompanied by a barely perceptible shrug of his shoulders. “Aren’t I?”

“You *aren’t.*”

“Then why am I here, Will?”

Will had expected there to be a ready response on the tip of his tongue, as he could surely produce an itemized, alphabetically-sorted, dissertation-length list of why he *shouldn’t* be in Will’s bedroom *or* hallway at ass o’clock in the night (complete with a dedicated table of contents, footnotes, and a bibliography to boot.)

But for the life of him, he could not provide anything approaching a sufficient answer to the *why* of it all.

So, petulantly, he ran his hands over his face in the manner of a man hoping to wipe it clean off, then covered his eyes and shook his head. “You’re not real.”

Silence.

A while passed before Will even considered putting his hands away. A few minutes, at the very least—a few minutes of awkwardly shifting from foot to foot (wishing he had put on some socks or slippers), listening to his own breathing resound through the quiet hallway.

Upon determining the coast was clear, Will looked at the spot where Hannibal had last stood.

He found that Hannibal was still there.

“I am only as real as you wish me to be.”

A humorless, shocked sort of laugh escaped him. “Funny, I don’t believe that at all. I don’t recall *wishing* to see the phantasm of my worst nightmare taking nighttime excursions to my house.”

A beat.

“Do you believe me to be your worst nightmare?”

“Yes,” Will snapped, wilting as the glaring lack of conviction in his own voice reached his ears. If Hannibal picked up on it (*if* being incredibly wishful thinking bordering on total naivete; *of course* Hannibal didn’t miss that crucial little detail—as if he would ever), he did not provide a single indication. His countenance remained as cool and neutral as a sheet of glass. Infuriating.

“Interesting.”

“It’s not. It’s very straightforward. It’s upsettingly uncomplicated, now that I think on it,” he bit out. A pause, then, “I meant what I had said.”

“At the time, certainly, yes,” Hannibal inclined his head by way of agreement.

“I still do.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Very well—so you do.”

“So I do.”

Hannibal side-stepped him (Will realized that this is the first time he’s actually seen him *walk*, take steps, instead of simply materializing somewhere in Will’s line of sight), walked a couple of paces down the narrow hallway, and simply stopped by the window. He appeared even more ghostly bathed in white moonlight; there was something erring on the side of uncanny valley there. The sharp, defined features of Hannibal’s face cast shadows in all the wrong places—beneath his eyes, his cheekbones, his nose, the underside of his lips. Will shuddered involuntarily.

“You should go,” he tried.

Hannibal did not indicate in any way that he’d heard Will (a jackass move if Will’s ever seen one, because he most definitely *did.*)

“I don’t need or want you here, Dr Lecter.”

Hannibal finally turned his head, oh so slowly. A measured look was thrown his way. “I would have thought you’d have learned to recognize the value in being honest with oneself,

Will. Has my absence stunted you so?"

Will grit his teeth. "I am being honest."

"You *think* you are, for in the past you have trained yourself—successfully, might I add—to say and, to a degree, think only that which you consider you *should* be saying or thinking as a member of the polite society," Hannibal made use of a well-timed pause. "We both know that, oftentimes, your true feelings do not align with that which is widely-accepted. Even if you *have* pretended-away that fragment of yourself."

Will crossed his arms over his chest, intensely and relentlessly eyeing a crack in the wall. The hairs on his arms bristled. "Why would I need or want you here, then?"

Hannibal considered this for a moment. "You must understand that I know only as much as you know. If I had to take a *crack at it,* as you might put it, I am an external manifestation of an inner conflict." He looked pleased with that deduction. "You must look inward for answers, Will. Deep, should it be deemed necessary—I know not how hard you have worked to bury me."

Will felt, suddenly and perhaps unrightfully so, slighted. Perhaps less so *slighted* and more so *deeply shaken and thus almost offended* by the way Hannibal carelessly peeled away the layers of skin and deflection and suppression he'd worked so hard to pile on, to blot so much shit out in attempt to remain sane, to gain the ability to start anew, to survive (and how well was that going for him?) He had to remind himself that this Hannibal was in fact Not-Hannibal, incredibly fake actually and totally not real, still entirely in Will's head despite appearances (appearances being that he'd escaped the confines of Will's skull.) He paced, as he was really good at that, and he took deep breaths, at which he was only decent, and glared at the man-shaped nightmare with the hatred of a thousand suns, privately hoping all that derision packed into a single look would cause the other to combust, or perhaps melt away.

This did not happen. Hannibal only appeared vaguely amused, judging by the slight quirk of his lips. Could he read Will's mind? He couldn't, could he? He was *inside* Will's mind, which was a cause for worry, and Will only prayed that Mind-Hannibal had limitations.

He dismissed the idea straight away. He bore absolutely no desire to unpack a single thing he hadn't already touched on (of which there were, admittedly, many). Instead, he deflected (a practiced skill, clearly.)

"I will not go to the BSHCI to see you." Will's voice was firm, assertive—which was good, because that was quite was he was going for, although he was certain his surprise at the fact that he'd managed to sound convincing must have shown on his face at least momentarily. He must have *really* meant it; good on him.

(It remained slightly unclear where the sudden urge to reaffirm this came from.)

Hannibal persisted in his mild amusement. His hands, which had been clasped behind his back, came apart and gently spread in a gesture of *here I am.* "You need not step outside your home to see me, Will."

“You say it like it’s a good thing,” Will grit his teeth.

“I state it as a fact.”

“You’re full of shit,” Will resumed pacing. He was seething, now, or something inside him seethed. Something feral that clawed at his ribcage, begging to be let out. The absolute nerve of him. The gall. The audacity. The cheek. The chutzpah. He wanted to pounce and—

No. Breathe.

Silence.

Will stopped pacing.

“Won’t you say anything?” he demanded, “Have they robbed you of your witticisms?”

“You do not enjoy my witticisms*,* Will.”

“I don’t. I hate them. I hate you.”

Hannibal smiled.

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Will woke up feeling like utter shit. His eyes were, naturally, drawn to the crappy little digital clock on his bedside table. It kindly let him know how egregiously he’d overslept.

At least, having egregiously overslept, he felt little pressure to leap up and frantically put on clothing. He might have done this if it were around ten or so, and he could just barely salvage some of his morning. Currently it being just after twelve, he was resigned to the fact that there really was not much he could do to fix this, so he may as well just lay there.

With the bed empty, he rolled onto his back and spread-eagled. He could pretend this was entirely on purpose and he was very consciously electing to have a lazy day.

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The rest of that day was sluggish, uneventful, mind-numbingly boring. Walter and Molly mostly stayed out of his way, and he stayed out of theirs.

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Waking up to the sound of his alarm and a yellowish sort of light seeping into the bedroom was… shocking. Will sat upright quickly, looked to the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. It was tall, and imposing, and a clock—nothing more and nothing less. It ticked softly, quietly. It read five-thirty a.m.

“Will?” came Molly’s voice from just beside him. When he turned his head, she was looking at him quizzically, almost worriedly (was that bordering on fanciful sort of thinking?), “… everything alright?”

“What? No, uh, yeah, sure, ‘course,” he babbled, getting out of bed on autopilot. He possessed enough presence of mind to remember that he very much had places to be, and that he ought to hurry. Luckily, he managed to get himself into the car (looking mostly presentable, but then again, the standards weren’t very high in his line of work) in about half an hour. He shoved a thermos of hot coffee into one of the cup holders, and took off.

The roads were mostly empty, which was a true testament to the fact that perhaps luck really decided to be on his side today (which was a pleasant change of pace.) He made it down to the Marina in just under half an hour, with only minor speeding necessary. By the time he pulled up behind the shop, it was just shy of six-thirty.

Although he wouldn’t need to clock in before seven, by Eamonn’s standards, he was cutting it *real fine.*

Eamonn McAllister could be summed up in two words: an unforgiving hardass. His work ethic couldn’t be paralleled—Will was certain it’d even make Jack balk—and to say that he held others to the same standard was an understatement. The man lived for putting in long hours and never cutting a single corner; in fact, Will had the sneaking suspicion Eamonn purposely took the hard way out of any given situation more often than not. All in the name of building character, or something along those lines.

He owned a boat repair shop near the Belmont Bay harbor by the name of Maritime Masters, and though it was hardly the only one in the area, it was perhaps the best known. For one thing, it was the oldest—established way back when Eamonn emigrated to the area and remained utterly unchanged in every respect—and for another thing, Eamonn’s sky-high standards yielded favor with the local boating community (which was mostly made up of men older than Will, who have known Eamonn and his shop for years if not decades, and didn’t fancy trying out anything new.)

Will fit in surprisingly well with that crowd.

Landing a job in Eamonn’s shop did come as a bit of a shock when it happened, some two years ago now. He’d freshly handed in his two-week notice at Quantico (much to the absolute chagrin of Jack’s), and feeling somewhat lost, got into his car and drove aimlessly. The randomly-taken turns led him to Woodbridge, and the sight of water in the distance led him to the harbor. He’d parked the car (‘parked’ being a nice way of putting it—really, Will mostly just stopped the car and hoped it wouldn’t get towed. And if it did, well, it wouldn’t be the first time something had gone terribly wrong in his life. He could still feel the throbbing ache in the not-quite-healed wounds acquired at Muskrat Farm, another throbbing ache originating somewhere suspiciously close to his heart, too) and took to aimlessly trudging along the docks, weaving between neatly arranged rows of boats, subconsciously trying to find one similar enough to that which he’d grown up with, smiling once he did.

He’d approached it, reached a hand out to pet the hull (reverently so), and hadn’t managed to do much else before there appeared an angry Irishman, as though out of nowhere—marching towards Will, telling him quite unkindly to *stop handin’ on my things, boy!*

Will couldn't tell you exactly how things had transpired then and there, only that they had ended up back at the bar across the street (which the man had run out of previously, as it

happened). The man, whose name he had learned to be Eamonn, seemed to have been sufficiently placated by Will's undoubtedly warbled explanation as to why he had touched the boat (that, or he had clocked Will for being the absolute head-case that he was, and thought him too pitiful for even so much as a perfunctory deck in the jaw; it would have been comparable to kicking a down dog, which Will would come to learn wasn't Eamonn's style).

At the bar, a depressingly small amount of drinks had made Will loose-tongued enough to spill some deeply embarrassing details about his upbringing — all about his daddy who fixed boats for a living and had been teaching his boy to do the same since Will was only about twelve, maybe even younger. He talked about how Will knew his way around a diesel engine (the most common type in fishing boats) better than his way around… anything else, really (they're are usually large and have multiple cylinders. The number of cylinders can vary, typically ranging from four to eight, and higher in some cases. The more cylinders an engine has, the smoother its operation, with reduced vibrations and increased power output. These engines often have a high horsepower rating to ensure the boat can reach desired speeds quickly and maintain efficiency while hauling heavy catches or maneuvering in adverse conditions. The horsepower can range anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand, depending on the size and type of fishing boat. So on and forth.) How he knew he'd disappointed daddy when he went off to college, but Will Sr. didn't begrudge him (not too badly, anyway) as he'd always known his son was too bright to end up like him.

Actually, now that he thought on it, it seemed a little clearer as to why Eamonn had hired him all but on the spot—if Will could effortlessly rattle off next to useless (in his line of work) information about engine build and repair while drunk off his ass, he could be damn useful in a repair shop. Will, of course, hadn't forgotten to mention he was freshly out of work. Really, it had been all too perfect.

He'd started the very next day.

Will still couldn't help feel terribly embarrassed about the whole ordeal, especially as Eamonn found much entertainment in reminding him of the circumstances of their meeting (and their subsequent partnership) any chance he got. Although, he conceded it could have always been worse: he was glad that his drunken self had had the presence of mind to pour his heart out about a long-forgotten past, rather than ripping open barely-scabbed-over wounds.

In not so many words, Will was glad Eamonn was entirely ignorant of Hannibal, and everything else surrounding the events leading up to Hannibal's surrender.

Will was certain Eamonn was peripherally aware of it all, though the Irishman seemed to have thus far made no connection between *that* and the Will he had found at the docks and taken in like a stray.

Right, anyway—six-thirty o'clock, Will entering the shop through the back-door, late for his seven o'clock shift by his boss' standards.

"You're late, William," noted Eamonn, crouched down next to the open engine compartment of a petite little sailboat that fit into their workshop *just* barely. His hands were covered in grease up to the elbows (ever forgoing any kind of gloves—Eamonn always said that,

whenever he could, he preferred not being tactilely-stunted, and perhaps there was something in that), his focus unwavering even as he addressed Will. He didn't need to look up to discern who had come in—he liked to joke he could smell them, but Will thought it more likely he simply recognize the step-pattern.

Will bestowed him with the most long-suffering of sighs, shrugging off his coat and hanging it on a small rack mounted by the door. "I know your memory's hardly what it used to be—you know, at your age—but *Will* couldn't possibly be that hard to remember, could it?" he made his way over to a beat-up old locker, taking a pair of work-overalls out. "*Will,* like the verb. Like: *Will you live to see tomorrow if you keep pulling this shit?* Et cetera."

Eamonn only huffed a low laugh, and begrudgingly, Will did too.

"What are you working on, anyway?"

"Lad brought her in yesterday, during Katie's shift," Eamonn explained, "a tourist of sorts, I reckon. Engine broke down, he and the wife and the wains have rented a room at the inn 'till we've got her sorted."

Will hummed thoughtfully, watching Eamonn work over his shoulder.

"You gonna stand there like a useless shite all day, or?"

Will rocked back and forth on his heels, "You look like you've got it under control."

Eamonn laughed again, a grunting sort of sound. "Lord knows why I've hired you."

"And the Lord alone."

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Once the actual working hours of the shop rolled around, Will became significantly busier. It did not take a long time at all for a thick layer of grease and grime and sweat and dirt to build up on his skin, which was just as well. Will *missed* doing dirty work, missed finding himself elbow-deep in an engine compartment, missed struggling to tell apart where his dark-grey gloves ended and where his skin begun.

His movements were deliberate and confident as he removed and replaced the worn out parts of a very run-of-the-mill fishing boat, brought in earlier today. With practiced ease, he adjusted valves, tightened connections, and double-checked everything as his daddy had taught him. He worked with utmost concentration, easily able to push away any stray thoughts that were not directly related to the task at hand. He treasured these few hours of the day that he could afford to have a head empty of Hannibal and Molly and everything else that's been slowly chipping away at his sanity lately.

After meticulous reassembly, he stepped back, wiping the sweat from his brow. With a sense of accomplishment, he started the engine and listened intently, his ear attuned to the symphony of well-oiled parts coming to life. A satisfied grin spread across his face as the engine roared to life, humming smoothly and effortlessly.

Perhaps Will Sr. had had a point in dedicating his life to this.

amaranth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The service bay was dimly lit as Will walked inside, the familiar smell of sea salt and machinery inducing a weird sort of calm on the first inhale; nevermind that the air in this part of the shop tended to veer on the unappealing side of stale (was there such a thing as an *appealing* side of stale?) Somewhere deeper within the room, he could hear a pair of overlapping voices, the clank of metal, the whirring of power tools, the hiss of air compressors. There never was a quiet moment here, which by rights should make Will automatically disdainful and strung-out. It was odd that this wasn't the case; though, granted, the louder his thoughts have become of late, the more he appreciated any opportunity to drown them out. There was still a peculiar sort of buzzing in the back of his mind right now —it sounded like the flutter of wings of a million moths, a rustling melody, a whispering chorus.

A wrench screeched, an engine hummed, and the moths were no more.

"Eamonn, Katie," Will extended each of them a nod, rolling up the sleeves of his plaid as he approached the sailboat that had taken center stage. It was a weathered thing, and whether that could be attributed to neglect or overuse could be debated. Too little love, or too much love? It was all the same in the end, wasn't it? Identical fate awaited the little boat in either scenario; it had ended up at Maritime Masters regardless; this was either enormously comforting or overwhelmingly harrowing, depending on how one elected to look at it. (And that was if one had chosen to make a stunningly trite metaphor out of the whole thing—which Will, of course, hadn't.)

It was just a boat in a dingy little shop, getting a fresh coat of paint, and a few tweaks to the machinery here and there. Leave it at that, Graham.

"You sound chipper," Katie stated wryly (unhelpfully), briefly tearing her eyes off the sanded hull to look quizzically at Will, before resuming her work; she held a sander in a steady hand, gliding it expertly down the length of the boat's side, doing away with the old paint and the rust and any other grime alongside.

"Had a few rough nights," Will shrugged, waving his hand as though he could physically bat the question away. The chime of the bell above the main entrance sounded, cueing Eamonn to abandon his post, hand Will the tools, and make his way over to the front desk. Will took his spot across Katie, not thinking twice about picking up where Eamonn left off. "Couldn't get more than a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, that's all."

"Trouble sleeping, hm?" Katie hummed thoughtfully, "Mind keeping you awake?"

Will hesitated. Instincts told him (screamed at him) to be mindful of the trap; it would have been a trap most certainly, once upon a time. It would have marked him *unstable, again*. It would have sown mistrust of his thoughts and actions in those around him, it would have had

Jack disturbed and Alana pitying, would have had Price and Zeller leaving between them and him a slightly wider berth. It would have been a flashing neon sign above his head, shouting: THIS MAN HAS TOTALLY REGRESSED, GUYS. TREAD WITH CAUTION. Will's lip curled in distaste at the fleeting imagery,

Was he *unstable, again*? He felt stable, he thought, for the most part. Mostly stable, yeah, save for those few hours here and there. Stable like a horse. Ha. (God, maybe he *was* losing the plot.)

"Will…?"

Eyes snapping up, he saw Katie craning her head above the hull to get a better look at him. His cheeks reddened; shit, had he done it again?

"What? Oh, well, something like that, I suppose." Stick to the vagueities. Besides, it wasn't that uncommon for a man nearing his forties to lose some sleep here and there, right? Maybe he was being really haunted by… taxes. Or a mortgage. Maybe his car broke down. Maybe his wife had a lover (perhaps, for Molly's sake, she should look into it.) Yeah, Will reasoned, there were a number of stressors that could make him sleep-deprived; nobody would necessarily jump to the conclusion that he was hearing and seeing gore that wasn't there; that he was seeing and hearing a person that wasn't there.

Katie extended him a knowing sort of look, but seemed resigned to doing the opposite of pushing the issue. Will could appreciate that about Katie.

For her age, she seemed remarkably apt at reading people and acting accordingly. That, or Will was so socially inept that the bare minimum seemed *remarkable.* Regardless, Katie, brushing her mid-twenties, had a mostly spotless record in Will's book: she was lighthearted in everything she said and did, yet not to the point of insensitivity; she was cheerful enough to balance Eamonn's (and Will's) sourness, yet not to the point of obnoxiousness; she was friendly enough to put Will mostly at ease, yet never too forthcoming as to make him clam up and pull away. She wasn't a friend, but Will didn't hate her presence. He tolerated it. (More than *tolerated*, really.)

With a predictable amount of finesse, Katie changed the subject. "Better be careful there, Graham. This is a special project, you know."

Will huffed a soft laugh, rolling his eyes. "Yeah? How so?"

"The owner said it has sentimental value. We're to take *extra care* with it." She said this in a manner which implied verbatim, and Will could just hear the the pomposity in the customer's voice coming out of her mouth.

"If it's so valuable, how'd they get it to this point?" Will gave the whole boat a once-over again, taking in the damage for the second time.

Katie shrugged, "I wasn't there for the whole convo, overheard most of it coming back from a smoke break—but, I think it was something or other about a late family member."

Will nodded thoughtfully, “They tend to be.”

“That they do.”

“Trying to revive the dead by the means of restoring a rundown personal belonging seems to be on just the wrong side of misguided,” Will said, and it felt like he was saying it to nobody in particular, even with Katie still actively participating in the conversation. “Especially in this condition…” he patted the hull, “reckon whoever it was, didn’t care much for the old boat. They won’t find them there.”

“Maybe so,” she shrugged, “Do you really think that’s what they’re trying to do? Revive the dead?”

Will paused, mulled it over, then finally shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t really know. I guess I just struggle to see the point. The dead won’t be here to see it. A sailboat is hardly a mantlepiece. It’ll be stored away for many years to come, and with some luck, it’ll be brought to Eamonn’s to be reborn again. Ad nauseam.”

“You don’t think they’ll use it, perhaps?”

“Use it? No,” Will shook his head, needing not contemplate it. “This thing—it’s old. It’ll cost a pretty penny to repair and restore. It’ll take *time,* too. If they really wanted a sailboat just to use it, purchasing a new one would’ve been a lot less hassle.”

Katie hummed in acknowledgement. The topic died down, leaving their conversation lingering in the air like an unanswered question.

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Will had not meant to fall asleep. Honest. He’d gone back to his car during his break, to finish whatever was left from his morning coffee and to actually have the lunch Molly had packed for him (tuna sandwiches, FYI.)

The coffee had remained undrunk, the lunch uneaten—and Will? Totally passed out the second his ass had hit the car seat. It wasn’t even comfortable, he’d fallen asleep sitting up, mouth agape like a fish. A really dumbass fish.

He jolted awake to sharp raps on the window, the annoyed face of Eamonn glaring at him through the glass. Will had the good sense to be mortified to the bone the second he woke up. He squeezed out the door (Eamonn was standing quite close, he could barely open it—but the man didn’t seem eager to move an inch.)

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” Will ran a hand over his face, through his hair. He felt like a little kid. Eamonn didn’t say anything, prompting Will (in his histrionics) to fill the silence with a litany of apologies. “It wasn’t on purpose, I swear, I’d just gone out for lunch… I should’ve brought it inside, I wasn’t thinking. It won’t happen again. I promise.” Awkward silence for a few seconds. “I’m sorry.”

“Shut your bake, son, a man can’t even think from all that drivel,” Eamonn sighed, exasperated. He put both hands on his hips, shaking his head gently while looking Will over as if Will was a faulty cylinder causing problems for the whole system (perhaps he was.) “I can’t say I’m not right miffed, gone for hours, find him passed out in the damn car—but you’ve been running on fumes for weeks, I should’ve seen it coming. Looking like a proper zombie, dead on your feet, all damn day. Tell you what,” Eamonn shrugged, pausing mid-monologue as if to contemplate what he was about to say, for one last time, “You go home. Get some shut-eye, tell the missus it’s captain’s orders. Take tomorrow off. I’ll see you Monday.”

Will was perhaps too overcome with shock to say anything right away. He stared at Eamonn blearily, trying to make sense of it all. (Not to mention he had *just* woken up, so cut him some slack.)

“You hear me, boy?”

“Uh—yes. Yeah. Yeah, I do,” Will nodded, nervously running his hand through his hair again. A sort of dread suddenly settled low in his gut, the scar suddenly throbbed. Was he imagining that? “It won’t be necessary. I’ll come in tomorrow. Hell, I’ll go back to the shop right now. It’s okay. I’m okay. Really.”

“Ach, catch yourself on, son, you’re not setting a foot in there in your state,” Eamonn shook his head. “Last thing I need is you passing out over an engine compartment. Not a chance. Go.”

Will let his head drop. He could admit defeat. “Yeah. Okay. Let me just say bye to Katie.”

“Aye, you do that,” Eamonn nodded curtly, turned, and trudged back inside.

Two truths and a lie—maybe one truth and a lie, really—as Will had the intention to find Katie, but not really to go home. He couldn’t. If he could exist (even sleep) elsewhere peacefully, he was reluctant to return.

He found Katie finishing a cigarette on the bench across the front entrance of the shop. She handed it over when Will approached without asking twice (or once), and he duly did the job himself.

He hadn’t checked the time in all that ruckus, but Will was sure it was at least nearing seven p.m. The sun was setting, the sky aglow with fiery oranges and purples. The anchored boats were but silhouettes against the vivid backdrop. It was a pretty sight, thought Will, letting a thin trail of smoke seep out between his lips, curling and twisting skyward in the way smoke usually did. The tip of the cigarette mirrored the reddish-orange flickers reflecting in his eyes.

Before it could burn his fingers, Will tossed the butt to the ground and stomped it, exhaling the weight of the world into the air. Bad etiquette? Perhaps. Certainly.

“Where have you gone to, then? Eamonn thought you’d gone home,” Katie looked up at him from the bench.

Will huffed out a sort of humorless laugh, “Crashed. In the car, I mean. As in, fell asleep. I didn’t… crash the car.”

“Damn,” Katie whistled, “talk about overworked.”

“Overworked? Nah,” Will shook his head, allowing one of the curls to fall across his forehead. “Just overtired. You know already.”

“I do,” she conceded. “You’re not going home?”

“Not yet, I don’t think.”

“Had something in mind?”

“Not really.

“Shall we grab a drink?”

“Your treat? Sure, let’s.”

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The second they arrived, Will felt paralyzed by the thought that this had been a horrendously bad call on his end. What was he thinking? A *bar*? Was he seventeen? The air was thick with the scent of aged wood, the aroma of spirits, and the sudden sense of déjà vu that hit him like a freight train—Will, all lanky limbs and boyish muscle and inquisitive blue eyes, trotting after his daddy and daddy’s friends, a bunch of mechanics (boat and otherwise) after long hours at the boatyard; Will, downing his first sip of whiskey and wincing at the burn down his throat; Will, stumbling home with his old man, confused at the look of bittersweet familiarity on daddy’s face when he made it to the couch but couldn’t quite make his legs cooperate enough to get him upstairs. We’d seen this film before—through several generations of William Grahams.

Will was regretting the decision immediately. Should’ve sucked it up and gone home.

Well, a little too late now.

Will didn’t doubt Katie knew the place; he didn’t need to be a (former) FBI profiler nor a Sherlock Holmes of any sort to notice the way she moved through the place with ease, weaving between occupied tables with her eyes on the bar itself, knowing the route without needing to look. They took a seat side by side at the bar. Will rolled back his shoulders and consciously unclenched his jaw.

“You alright, Graham? Don’t tell me you’re sober or something—we could’ve gone elsewhere, you know.” Katie tilted her head at him. Will had the sudden, most inexplicable premonition he was hearing somebody else. Not in the way he’s been hearing things lately, no; there was a familiarity in the way Katie spoke to him, the way she held herself. Before he could continue pondering on this, Katie resumed her own string of thoughts, and perhaps that was for the best. “Well, if you are, they could fix you a virgin margarita or something—I’m not looking for a drinking buddy, just some intelligent company.”

Will snapped out of it (he's been doing this so much lately, losing himself in his head, racing thoughts drowning out any sound around him. It was mildly worrying. Well, a lot worrying. But what was he gonna do about it? See a therapist? Yeah, right—how well had that gone for him the last time?)

"Oh, no," Will shook his head, cracking a small smile (or a semblance of one) that he hoped was reassuring enough. Katie smiled back—she was one of those people who couldn't wrangle theirs, who had to display both rows of teeth and even the pink of their gums whether they liked it or not. It gave her a sort of youthful quality, made her look even younger than she already was. There was enough unabashedness about her for the both of them—which was a good thing, because Will would need to borrow some of hers to get through this. (Well, less borrow, more *mirror.* Call it a figure of speech.)

"So, what'll it be, mister?"

"Whiskey," said Will, "neat."

Katie made a show of groaning and rolling her eyes, "But lord, you can be such an old man sometimes."

A shocked, genuine laugh escaped him. "Not sure what else I'd be, considering I *am* an old man."

"Please, you're not *that* old, you just like to act like it. News flash, cupcake: the whole boorish grandpa thing? Not a good look on you."

Will snorted, ducking his head to conceal a smile—a far more genuine one than before. In the meantime, Katie took the liberty of ordering for them both. Will noted she matched his drink.

A beat.

Beverly.

Will's head snapped up, eyes locking on Katie.

They looked nothing alike. Nothing. Long black hair versus a ginger bob; brown eyes versus blue; a clear face versus a scattering of freckles. And yet—and yet.

Will felt quite ill. He cleared his throat, forced himself to look down at the polished wood of the bar. His fingers dug into his thighs, aching from the sheer force he had to exert to press into the denim. He had to quit this; he had to get a better handle on himself. It's been two years, longer yet since Beverly… well. Point being, he'd thought he'd finished running. He thought he'd finished running from it all when he'd married Molly. Apparently, what was before seemed hellbent on catching up. Will simply had to shift into gear again, and never look back. Try not to, anyway.

A glass of whiskey (neat) was pressed into his hands, and he promptly took a long drink from it.

By some miracle, a positive tonal shift slightly amended what was fixing to be a terribly shitty night. Well, that, or the alcohol. Either way, Will was feeling rather more chipper than before. (No one get it twisted, though—chipper by *Will's* standards, which was still marginally sulkier than what would constitute as 'chipper' by anyone else's.)

He wasn't *really* drunk—having long stopped being fond of the feeling, the lack of control over his body, the dulled senses—but he seemed to be just on the wrong side of inebriated enough for Katie to take one good look at him upon their leaving the bar to say: "You can't drive tonight, no way. Why don't you crash at mine?"

The question had a something of a sobering effect. He tensed, abruptly, almost as if struck. Katie look at him with a peculiar sort of expression on her face.

"No, uh, I'm good," he shrugged, blinking away the blurriness from his eyes.

"You don't *look* good," Katie raised a brow, gently swaying on her feet.

Will shook his head, "I'm fine, Katie. Wouldn't be my first rodeo." He had a little under two decades on her, besides. He could handle himself—especially having been given a head start in that department, curtesy of Will Sr.

"Okay. Drive safe, then."

Will felt a little more clear-headed after having walked the ten or so minutes to where his car was still parked. A little more yet after fishing for the bottle of water he always kept in his glove compartment, and downing it nearly in one go. He gave himself another few minutes of respite before backing out of the parking lot and heading for Wolf Trap.

He seemed to possess the good sense to stick to the back-roads, mostly (when possible). Considering that was quite the detour, and given the fact he really tried not to go over thirty miles per hour, he mentally prepared himself for the long drive ahead. He glanced at the little blinking digital clock—nearly midnight. (Had he adjusted that according to daylight savings yet? Fucking Christ, he had no idea now. Not that it mattered. He was already unforgivably late. At least he'd shot Molly a message about it a few hours ago. She hadn't replied yet.)

Will winced whenever he'd hit a pothole or a patch of gravel. The car—a shitty Ford Crown Victoria from 2002, that he'd gotten secondhand two years ago—was already abysmally rickety and on the verge of falling apart for good (not to mention the fact that every little bump in the asphalt felt like a fucking earthquake); he really didn't want to accelerate its demise. (Will still wasn't really sure why he'd purchased it. Perhaps it was a misguided attempt to introduce some stability when his life had been at its most unstable—pound a perfectly acceptable Honda Accord in favor of a sort of car his daddy had driven way back when, a sort of car he'd scrounged up enough money for after working a miserable job at a gas station after having gotten his license at sixteen. The epitome of mediocrity on wheels, and so very familiar. So very normal.

It was almost comical in its ghastliness: all questionable design choices and the most lackluster performance imaginable. An exterior of mismatched sharp angles and awkward curves; faded, peeling layers revealing occasional patches of the rusty body underneath.

Under the hood, a small, underpowered engine that regularly struggled to get the thing up to speed (complete with the occasional emitting of strange noises) (which Will could probably fix, or afford to get fixed, but there was just something stopping him.) The air-conditioning blew lukewarm air in his face in this very moment, and he eventually just turned the damn thing off and rolled down the windows (manually.) Will tried turning up the radio, but the increasingly louder sound of static crackling made him turn it down again.

He watched the little red arrow on the fuel sensor move comically quickly as he rattled down the road. The thing guzzled gas like no tomorrow (of course.)

But by God if it didn't get him from point A to point B without fail.

His hands, limp on the wheel, felt ridiculously heavy to move—yet he managed, if only to change the radio station; at some point during the drive, the music gave way to the preaching of a very emphatic evangelist (if Will had to guess), but even he had his limits (and televangelists—*radiovangelists?*—were one of them.) Finger on the button, he changed the station, and… what was that?

Will furrowed his brows, feeling something warm and sticky coat the tips of his fingers. He chanced looking away from the road, looking down at the dashboard instead. Indeed, a thick sort of substance oozed from between the buttons, slowly seeping out and forming small, gloopy puddles by the stick-shift. As he passed beneath a street lamp, the beam of light illuminated the inside of the car only momentarily—but long enough to reveal the crimson of the fluid, deep and dark red as it clotted.

Will wiped his hand against his jeans, leaning forward this way and that, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It was definitely emerging from within the car, which he could barely wrap his head around.

He did not have the opportunity to ponder over it much longer.

Blinding lights flooding the inside of the car; the screech of tires; the crunch of metal; blaring horns piercing the air.

Time slowed.

Will stamped down on the brake with all that he had, the sheer force of the vehicle stopping nearly sending him flying out through the window-shield—which he would have, had he not been buckled in. As it was, the seatbelt bit into the skin of his shoulder, his chest, his abdomen—sharp pain zitted along his nerves, lit them on fire; blood pooled beneath his shirt (and it felt *real* this time, too real) where the skin broke. What happened in the fraction of a second seemed to take a lifetime, the suddenness of it all blending with the notion he was moving in slow-motion making Will's head spin. His hands gripped the wheel, which shook in tandem with his trembling hands. Or were his hands trembling intensely enough to shake the wheel? It didn't matter.

He couldn't tell you how in the world he'd managed to unpeel himself from the seat, push the door open, and stumble out of the car.

He saw a man—the other driver, he amended—exit his own vehicle. He was tall, long-legged. Which is probably how he'd managed to reach Will so quickly—for all the world, it felt as though he'd materialized in front of Will. He was yelling, then, shouting. Will didn't need to have an empathy disorder to feel the overwhelming amounts of anger and fear and frustration emanating off of him in waves, washing over him in turn.

And he was gone as soon as he came. Another screech of tires, the sound of a vehicle quieting as it drove further away.

Will turned, looked at his Crown Victoria, instinctually assessing the damage (as if it mattered). A busted headlight, dented aluminum. God, who gave a fuck. It was all a bunch of scrap metal held together by God-knows-what, hardly worth anyone's time or money.

But it was Will's car. God fucking damn it.

In a fit of frustration, he kicked the front tire with all his might. He regretted this immediately.

And then he walked away.

(Hands in his pockets, he resolutely refused to so much as look at them. Bloody? Clean? He couldn't bear knowing.)

(Could he ever again call them clean?)

And he kept walking, sticking to the side of the road, until he reached his house. He noiselessly slid inside, but—as his seventeen-year-old self—he collapsed on the couch without trying to make it any further.

He could feel the press of a wet nose or two against his face, his hand (the unpleasant doggy breath, too.) Vaguely, he heard shuffling and the pitter-patter of claws against wood, but—ultimately—Will passed out before he could even reminisce on the way he'd used to sleep with his pack, and reflect on how nice it'd been, and how much he *really* missed it.

Chapter End Notes

happy speak now (taylor's version) day to all those who celebrate

ruby

Chapter Notes

sorry for the wait!

The scene was… familiar.

A quiet space. Two opposing armchairs, containing two opposing persons. (Opposing only in the same manner one could argue that sides of a coin are opposing—but, semantics and all that.) A vestige of a chapter closed, come to unfold again.

Hannibal, armed with an impeccably tailored suit (bespoke, no doubt—even now), refined features, and a piercing gaze sat leisurely in one of Will's better armchairs (of course). It felt as though the living room had expanded, doubled or tripled in size to accommodate him and the sheer amount of space his presence took up—despite the fact he was still only a *little* taller than Will. Will, who currently sat rock-still in an armchair of his own (the one the dogs had had a go at), battling with the way he couldn't seem to get a good lungful of air to save his life.

He felt ridiculous. Hannibal, dressed to the nines. Will, in a tattered white sleeping shirt and a pair of briefs.

He glanced at Hannibal's empty hands. "Where's your notebook?" (Calling it a notebook felt ridiculous—the term seemed hardly *sophisticated* enough to encompass the stupidly bougie thing Hannibal normally took his therapy notes in. Will could recall feeling irrationally annoyed every time he'd seen it during their sessions, it struck a nerve even now: black, sleek, leather-bound (genuine, no doubt); smooth, thick paper, disallowing any bleed-through or feathering—which he knew, as he'd drawn *many* a fucked-up clock on them. But, then again, like his bespoke suits and gourmet recipes and fine rugs and the goddamn Bentley—it was quintessentially *Lecterian*. Will could hardly begrudge him for that. (Even though he'd really like to.))

Hannibal tilted his head, hawk-like. "Why should I require a notebook, Will?"

Will broadly gestured at them in lieu of a verbal reply.

Hannibal didn't *do* anything (for an infuriatingly long while), merely… observed, really, was the word for it. Will stared back with an intensity exacerbated by the icy paleness of his eyes, all the while fantasizing about what it'd be like to become Scott Summers for just a minute, assume the role of Cyclops just long enough to scorch Hannibal to a crisp with some handy-dandy optic beams. He'd really like that, he thought.

Hannibal's lips quirked, a ghost of a smile, and Will was left wondering once again whether this… *thing,* this *apparition* (he didn't want to use the other, more damning word) could know what he thought. He didn't have an answer, but he'd like to think it couldn't. For the sake of his own sanity (or the remnants of it.)

"Do you consider this to be therapy?"

"Is it not?"

"I will grant you that the… circumstances, such as they are, induce a certain sense of déjà vu. To the point of hilarity—"

"To the point of aggravation," Will cut in, eyes gleaming at the sight of Hannibal's mouth closing with a little *click,* relishing in the rudeness of it all.

Will wasn't the only one staring daggers, now. Neither of them spoke, for a time, and though they each were silent and still, Will was well aware that this, too, was not an insignificant step in this delicate choreography of perpetual conflict and equally perpetual force which kept them drawn together, despite opposing gravities. Two celestial bodies locked in a celestial waltz.

Good lord, that might've come right out of Hannibal's own mouth.

"You are aggravated to have me here?"

Will raised his brows, incredulous. "To say the least."

Hannibal, who had been sat with one leg crossed over the other, abruptly shifted and placed both feet on the ground. Leaning forward, ever so slightly. The movements were so swift and fluid, it was a blink-and-a-miss sort of situation. "I shall refrain from a repeated inquiry regarding the numerous whys and wherefores of my being here—if I, indeed, aggravate you so." Hannibal tipped his head, the smallest of movements echoing the greatest of challenges as that chin rose higher. "Something tells me you've yet to come up with…" upon saying this, he lifted a hand and made a noncommittal sort of gesture in Will's vague direction, "… anything approaching a satisfactory conclusion."

Will tensed as if struck. His shoulders became stiff, fingers dug into the armrests, jaw clenched. He thought his teeth might shatter like glass with the sheer force of pressure exerted upon them. In his mind eye, he could see it with perfect clarity; sudden, forceful, explosive—as if Hannibal himself had come to break that tail-end of a Prince Rupert's drop—all thirty-two of them, in point of fact. Will was not surprised, not really, when he tasted blood. How could he be, when he could just as well feel every broken shard that had dug into the soft flesh of his mouth, his tongue; when he could feel every sharp piece burying itself deeper with every micro-movement and subconscious twitch of his jaw. When he next opened his mouth, he was not so certain a waterfall of blood wouldn't pour right out of it, that it wouldn't coat his lips in crimson, that it wouldn't ruin his shitty sleeping-shirt and his dog-hair-dense rug and wouldn't soak into the worn floorboards of this decrepit old house. (What was once a home and a sanctuary now felt… barren, for a want of a better term. Barren of warmth, barren of solace, barren of comfort. Has Hannibal made it so?

Had Molly?)

“You know, Dr Lecter,” Will slowly leaned forward in his seat, clasping his hands together and interlacing his own fingers. Hannibal’s eyes bore into his, but Will didn’t waver; he didn’t know what he was trying to accomplish. Truthfully, he was only making himself increasingly uncomfortable and antsy—and his stare most certainly did not have the desired effect on Hannibal, who persisted in his ambivalence to Will’s efforts. “You’ve always had a penchant for… peppering thinly-veiled digs and carefully constructed verbal parries throughout conversations. I wonder that this doesn’t count as *rude* in your book.”

Hannibal had the gall to chuckle. “Are you calling me rude, Will?”

Will tilted his head, a mirroring and a mockery, as though taking his turn to assess the other. “Do you think you’re not?”

A beat. “What fate would you have me suffer for it?”

“You invite retribution?”

“I do so hope borrowing from your own vocabulary is acceptable,” Hannibal leaned back once more, at ease when he shouldn’t be (when Will didn’t want him to be), “Not retribution, no. Merely *tit for tat.*”

Will’s lips stretched into a sneer, all derision. “Tit for tat? Well, then, your fate would seem crystal clear to me.”

Hannibal grinned, revealing a glittering row of upper teeth. A familiar, unsettling sort of feeling washed over him at the sight, the same one that had always reared its head at the sight of Hannibal’s teeth in the past. He hadn’t known it then, but now he was sure it was something close to trepidation, perhaps some sort of primal fear one should always feel when faced with the open maws of a predator. Subconsciously, Will ran his tongue along his own (which, thankfully, were still there and unshattered); his weren’t so crooked, though nor were they so unusually pointy. He was stuck with the image of bloody-snouted tiger, tearing into the flesh of some poor herbivore. Could he fault the tiger for having evolved in such a way? Could he fault the tiger for purposing those built-in weapons as intended?

Hannibal, thankfully (and Will would never, ever admit to having thought this) spoke just then, disallowing Will to focus on anything but the conversation at hand. “I must say that auto-cannibalism has never crossed my mind. Not as such, perhaps—I have only ever given others the opportunity to partake.”

“And how benevolent you are, to *give* them the… opportunity.”

Hannibal shrugged slightly, as if to agree—disregarding the blatant sarcasm and hostility packed into that sentence.

“However,” Will spoke up again, “that is not what I would see you endure.”

Hannibal inclined his head. *Oh?*

Will met his eyes again. He swallowed. He licked his lips.

Will could see the very moment it *clicked.* Hannibal, previously so stony-faced and severe, seemed… *excited* wasn't the right word; impassioned, perhaps. Enraptured. Enthralled. His lips parted, the slightest amount—such a small, insignificant movement, yet which spoke of utter dishevelment. An unlikely loss of control, of composure. His eyes *glittered,* for god's sake—it was sick, it was perverse; Will despised the pleasure it brought him.

"You would eat me, dear Will?"

"Yes." He felt breathless.

Hannibal made a noncommittal sort of noise, some kind of an indistinct hum. Will looked askance, though he knew Hannibal's eyes were on him. He felt it in his bones.

"Where would you start?"

Will let his eyes fall shut. He breathed in (nothing but Hannibal's overpriced cologne entered his nostrils), breathed out. He didn't really know why he was stalling, pretending to think. He didn't need to *think,* he *knew.*

"I would," a breath in, a breath out, "I would eat your heart."

Hannibal observed him. "The consumption of the human heart has historically been documented across many cultures. When it came to the Aztecs, the act was associated with human sacrifice; the organ held the essence of a person's life force, and offering it to the gods was a way to sustain and honor them. Conversely, among Norse peoples, dining on the heart of a slain enemy held significance for the warriors. It was believed that by ingesting the heart of a valiant foe, one could acquire their strength, courage, and warrior spirit," said he, re-crossing his legs. "What would it represent for you, Will? If anything at all?"

Will tap-tap-tapped his fingers against the armrests, dull fingernails creating only a muffled sort of noise against the leather.

"I would not eat your heart symbolically," he spoke, slowly, feeling the weight of each word on his tongue, tasting it. "I would not eat your heart metaphorically. I would not eat your heart vengefully. I would not eat your heart reverently. I would eat your *heart,* Dr Lecter," he leaned forward, "because it's mine."

-

"Why can't we bring all of them?"

Will glanced at Walter from where he knelt by the front door, fastening an old, slightly tattered collar around Max's neck. He hadn't used any of those, or leads, in ages. It's always only been him and the dogs and uninhabited acres of land, giving him little reason to do so. But, needs must.

"Because," Will stood up with a slight grunt, his knees clicking uncomfortably. Christ. "They're largely lacking in the manners department. Street manners, at least. One'll be

enough trouble."

Walter frowned slightly, but didn't keep pressing the issue. He cast a forlorn sort of look at the rest of the pack, all looking equally stricken and heartbroken and depressed about the notion they'll miss out on one, singular trip outside the house.

They took Molly's car. He could say nothing about it, except that it was some flavor of Nissan, and it ran better than that tragedy of a Ford he'd called his own. The lack of rattling sometimes made Will feel irrationally angry. Walter didn't ask questions—which was just as well, because Will would offer no answer—on the matter of the disappearance of Will's own vehicle. In truth, Will had not gone back for it, and in all probability, it's long been towed away (and he was in no rush to claim it.) Molly, on the other hand, *had* asked questions (could Will fault her for it? Maybe he shouldn't, but he sort of did. At the very least, he was annoyed by it.) To say the least, she was none too pleased. Will had reminded her it was his own damn car, and they'd spoken no more of this.

Max rode in the trunk, his big furry head poking out behind the back seats. Walter held tightly onto the leash, despite there being no need for it. Whenever he saw that head make an appearance in his rearview mirror, Will allowed himself the luxury of a small, genuine smile. It was good, reminding his own face muscles what that sort of expression felt like. Lest he forget it.

He was really doing his damndest not to stamp on the brakes and U-turn homeward. Honest. Perhaps the only reason he hadn't already done so, and would in all likelihood not resort to it, was the meager promise he'd made Walter—not entirely consciously, not having realized quite what the boy was asking for when he'd *suggested* they take a day out, just the two of them, when Molly wasn't around. Will was now beginning to realize that it had originally perhaps been Molly's idea all along. He sighed, but that was really all he could do in the moment.

How bad could it be, besides?

He'd grant it—Walter was an exceptionally *un-needy* child. As low maintenance as it gets. No more complicated to take care of than rest of Will's pack (which was only mildly hyperbolic to say.) This suited Will just fine—he didn't think he'd do well with… anything else. (Not that he would even imply he was *doing well* with Walter. He thought he was mildly acceptable at best. He didn't hit the kid, right? That had to count for something.)

At least, this would be painless. It had to be.

He really hoped so.

He continued hoping as they pulled up in a little gravel parking lot near the dog park. Will looked around as he stepped out. Vienna, VA, looked largely the same as it always had. Walter was quick to unleash Max from the trunk—and off they went.

The park was alive with vibrant greenery and colorful blossoms, exuding a sense of… renewal, a serenity typical of late spring. The weather, as if to spite him, was uncharacteristically (and pleasantly) warm—with a complimentary breeze occasionally

grazing his face in its meander between the trees to go along with it. It carried with it the pleasant scent of flowers abloom. The entire scene was maddeningly picturesque. Will had a fleeting idea of becoming annoyed just to spite it (spite what? The intangible concept of weather and climate? Nature, for doing what it's meant to do at this time of year?) though quickly pushed the thought away as the realization of how monumentally childish that'd be set in. He settled on sticking both hands into the pockets of his jeans and watching Max and Walter lead the way deeper into the park.

He felt oddly removed from it all. Maybe he should not say 'oddly'—it'd be odd that he felt any other way. Always slightly out of place, always slightly on the outside looking in. As though a sheet of glass came between him and life (in the broadest sense.) He could see, but not touch. He could be seen, but not touched. Forever bound to exist in liminal spaces. A poltergeist.

Even now, the sounds surrounding him seemed oddly muffled, the way they might be when one's head is submerged. A watery veil engulfing the ears, the world above dissolving into reverberation of distant echoes. It was existence in a vacuum, a sort of non-being, treading through nothingness while deluding oneself into believing that there is *somethingness*. Dangling on the leash of one's own despair and yearning, both reaching for the void below and fighting it all the same.

There was only one voice which Will heard with perfect clarity—and it was not his own.

Need anything more be said beside this?

Walter materialized before him.

He couldn't have; not really. It only felt like it. This was hardly a surprise (leave it to Will to see things he shouldn't be seeing, and not see something he decidedly should have seen), and though one could most definitely classify it firmly under 'Causes For Worry' or 'Things That Should Raise Alarm', Will thought it was just… *one of them things*. Perfectly commonplace for the likes of him. In fact, thought he sardonically, it'd be stranger that he wasn't tweaking out in one way or another. Belatedly he realized that he was grinning at the irony of it all—which had stopped Walter's speech, whatever it may have entailed, and caused the child to simply stare at him, looking… well, slightly perturbed, if Will was being honest. He schooled his features into something less… disturbed and disturbing.

"What?"

"There's an ice-cream place across the street—can we go?" Walter was looking up at him, the perfect picture of a childish pleading. As if he needed to plead—they were already out here. Might as well.

Besides, Will has always considered himself more of a Fun Uncle type person. Minus the 'fun'.

The ice-cream parlor left much to be desired. Nestled inconspicuously on a forgotten street corner, one could hardly even say that this excuse for a frozen dessert haven has seen better days—as even that claim would be monumentally hard to believe.

As they approached the parlor, they were greeted by a lackluster sign with faded pastel colors, desperately clinging to its relevance. It read *Frosty Delights.* Off the top of his head, Will could list off several words doubtlessly more appropriate than 'delights'. (Though the misnomer was clearly the smallest of this place's issues.)

He patted his hands down his trousers, feeling for his wallet across a frankly unnecessary number of pockets. Having found it, he pressed a couple of bills into Walter's hand. He was certain it was too much, an unnecessary amount for a goddamn ice-cream. Still, as he passed the money, an image of a young boy floated forth from the depths of his mind—dark-haired and bright-eyed and red-faced—fishing for change, for anything at all, shoving his small hands into the pockets he knew to be empty, teary-eyed from the sheer embarrassment before the clerk that had recited the little green number flashing on the cash register. The number which was ruthlessly and unrelentingly higher than whatever the boy had managed to scrounge up, his eyes and heart set on candy that he'd already forgotten the taste of since the last time he'd gotten any from daddy.

Will turned away, shaken by the abruptness of the memory, hand clenching around Max's leash, eyes firmly on the pavement.

He heard rather than saw the door squeaking open reluctantly, as if it's trying to dissuade Walter from entering. Will could very well imagine the inside without having set a foot in there—the outdated decor, featuring mismatched chairs and stained tabletops; the flickering lightbulbs; the loose doorknobs.

He eventually peered inside through the glass storefront. Behind the counter, a disinterested teenager, who clearly had better things to do than scoop ice cream, begrudgingly read off the menu haphazardly taped to the wall. The selection of unimaginative flavors was entirely predictable—barely straying beyond vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry (he was surprised to hear pistachio among them—that seemed a mite too exotic, even.) Walter still took his sweet time making a choice, swaying back and forth on his feet while deliberating. Eventually the boy settled on a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of strawberry. With sprinkles. (Which looked borderline unappetizing, more akin to an assortment of vaguely edible pebbles.)

"Will? Is that you?"

Will whipped around at the sound of his name, a sense of familiarity washing over him as his eyes landed on the figure walking towards him. It stopped at a polite distance, and the two of them sort of awkwardly looked at one another. Only a couple of seconds of this mutual assessment, which felt as though they lasted… unreasonably long, stretching into eternity.

Will licked his lips, feeling the muscles in his jaw twitch, desperate to say something remotely meaningful (yet his tongue seemed to have forged a pact with paralysis.) The weight of silence bore down upon him. Will shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting around, searching for inspiration that remained elusive.

Before the awkwardness of the moment became so unbearable that Will was seriously considering beelining across the road (like a child), the other spoke. Presumably, he hadn't done so before, fearing it'd be out of turn. It *was,* at least by the standards of a regular

conversation. Which, of course, this would shape up to be anything but (mostly due to Will's participation in it.)

"I haven't seen you in ages, man. Where've you been? *How* have you been?"

"Zeller," Will said by way of a greeting. Then shrugged. "I've been fine. Just…" he vaguely waved his hand through the air, "keeping busy, really."

"Yeah?" Zeller smiled, eyes crinkling—an attempt at friendly, thought Will. "Well, I'm glad to hear it. You, uh, still teaching, then?"

Will shook his head, "No, not teaching. Boat repair, actually. Further south. Woodbridge." He wanted to smack himself upside the head—sounding like a fucking robot, managing choppy, two-word sentences at most at a time. It was just… well—he could almost physically feel his train of thought be interrupted by the inexplicable palpitations of his heart, as though the organ lodged itself inside his throat every couple of words, preventing anything resembling a smooth delivery of a reply.

He felt ridiculously, enormously lucky that Zeller had experienced far worse from him in the past, back when Will had been an encephalitis-ridden head-case aimlessly skulking around crime scenes and muttering unintelligible nonsense that only made sense to himself. (He was only *one* of those things now—what an improvement. Alert the press. Or don't. He didn't need to jinx himself and summon a certain red-haired menace of a wannabe journalist.)

"Boat repair? Damn," Zeller hummed, looking vaguely impressed (Will didn't really think he was; perhaps he feigned it for the sake of politeness.) "Guess it makes sense, you a fisherman. You still fish?"

"I don't."

That seemed to have taken him aback, or perhaps Zeller had expected him to say more on the matter, continue fueling this train-wreck of a small-talk. Will, suddenly, just *really* didn't want to. He almost relished in watching the other man rack his brain for a suitable-enough reply, cogs audibly turning. Zeller was the one averting his eyes now, while Will stared intently ahead. He felt like a menace.

"Oh… well… hobbies come and go, I guess. Nothing to it."

"Sure," Will nodded. A second, maybe two, of silence ensued. Will observed Zeller crumbling under it; he could almost see the hairline cracks in the façade of his face, inching up his cheeks, branching out the further they went. But, he too could be *benevolent.* "What about you? Still with the feds?"

"Oh, yeah, sure am," Zeller's shoulders dropped, some tension seeping out of him. Will felt in control of the conversation, in a sick sort of way. Like a puppeteer. Like… like… *well*. You know. "Same old grind there. Well, Jack's been riding our asses a lot less. A given, considering… well. It's been quiet, mostly, since… *well*. An odd third-degree murder here, an odd cold case there. Nothing to write home about. Damn, does that sound insensitive?"

The *wells* were beginning to give Will a headache. Oh, well.

Will shook his head. “Nah, you’re good. I get it. I mean, I’ve been there.”

“Sure, sure,” Zeller nodded.

They stuck their hands into their pockets in perfect unison.

Walter, bless him, chose that very moment to step out of the parlor. He looked positively delighted, even with the pitiful portion size and the subpar selection of flavors and the pebble-sprinkles. (Maybe *Frosty Delights* didn’t lie about being delightful.) The boy held out what had remained of the money. Will closed his little first, and gently shoved it away.

Will watched Zeller observe the interaction and the way Walter lingered around Will. He looked up at the strange man, lacking all shyness typical of children his age. “Hello.”

Zeller beamed, bending down ever so slightly. “Well! Hello there. What’s your name?”

“Wally,” replied Walter.

“How old are you, Wally?”

“Ten.”

“Wow! Double digits, huh? You’re very grown.”

Walter glanced up at Will. Will has never, ever seen an expression one could only describe as *incredulous* on such a young face. *Can you believe this guy?* etched into those innocent features.

“Not really. Ten isn’t that much.”

Zeller visibly sagged, though valiantly fought to keep up the enthusiasm. “Quite the math-whiz, aren’t you?”

Walter shrugged, standing up straighter. He shoved the remaining free hand into the pocket of his jacket. “I’m decent. Don’t like it much.”

“Ah, well, I didn’t either. Neither did your dad over here, far as I know,” he chuckled.

“I’m not familiar with Will’s *pro-cliv-ities*.”

Zeller blinked, a little wide-eyed. Will fought a smile. “I take it English is more your forte?”

“Sure.”

Zeller must have realized he was wrestling with an immovable object—or one and a half Will Grahams was too much to take on without prior preparation. He straightened back up, smiling feebly.

“I’ll catch you both some other time, yeah? We must, ah, catch up properly, Will. Or something.”

“Sure,” Will nodded, though made no move to reach for his phone to exchange contacts.

Granted, Zeller seemed totally fine with that. More than fine with that.

They exchanged unsurprisingly terse goodbyes.

Will felt a fragment of inexplicable pride swell somewhere inside his chest.

They passed through the dog park on their way to the car, by a little pond that the pathway curled around. Looking at it still surface, for a second, Will could swear he saw another person, a man, walking beside them. When he turned his head, there was nobody.

He didn’t stop thinking about it even on the drive home. Even as they walked into the house.

The blondish, windswept hair. The burgundy coat. The sharp cheekbones.

Of course.

carmine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re not real.”

A reprise of the night a couple of days ago—including the sitting arrangement.

“Aren’t I?”

“No.” Will thought he sounded rather certain, confident even. He quite liked that. It certainly inspired a newfound assertiveness—his spine straighter, shoulders rolled back, chest puffed out, chin tipped up.

“Is that why you can see me, Will? Smell me? Touch me?” Across him, Hannibal looked almost bored. To the untrained eye, perhaps. Being that his eye was *very* trained, thank you very much, Will didn’t miss the glimmer in Hannibal’s. Nor did he miss the curl of his lip, the way one of his feet (the one belonging to the leg he’d crossed over the other) couldn’t remain stagnant, moving up and down while the rest of the man’s body remained creepily statuesque (betraying his intrigue.) And——yes, *creepy.* Hannibal ought to own the adjective.

The absurdity of the statement roused a shocked sort of laugh from Will before he could stifle it. It had a decidedly bitter undertone to it. “I have seen and smelled things which weren’t real before. You saw to that, in fact.” He thought he’d pass the talking stick to Hannibal here, yet leaving the last part of the man’s statement unaddressed felt hell of a lot like inadvertently admitting to something. He wasn’t quite sure what—but *something.* “And I can’t touch you.”

“Can’t you?”

“No.”

“What makes you so certain of this? You have never taken a… stab at it, shall we say. In fact, you have dutifully kept your distance so far. I wonder, why is that?”

“You repulse me.”

Hannibal’s lips stretched into a small smile. Such a delicate, minuscule movement. Such a blatant display of glee. “Are you attempting to deceive me or yourself? I find myself having some difficultly staying on top of it all, as it were.”

Will pressed his lips together with such force they formed a single, near-seamless line. Frustration emanated from him in such thick bursts that one might say he was enveloped in it, entirely. Thus, he needn’t provide a verbal response to the inflammatory statement; Hannibal could infer.

“No. You prefer the easy way out, always relishing in ignorance and uncertainty that has kept you safe from the ruthlessness of that which is real,” Hannibal stated, in such a way that did

not invite opposition. “You have never been particularly brave, have you, Will?”

Will could see, in his mind’s eye, himself leaping from the armchair and tackling the good doctor to the ground. Still, he refrained from a display of madness so blatant. Instead, he shot back, near instantly—the only proverbial knife he thought might cut Hannibal. “Beverly was brave.”

A silence, a halftime, a brief respite. They stood each of them still as stone. They often were, when they were most at odds. Two immovable objects, their wills an unstoppable force. Two forts, their words battering rams.

“Is Katie brave?”

Will’s brows came together, forehead lined with confusion. “What has Katie to do with this? With you?”

“Nothing,” Hannibal uncrossed and then re-crossed his legs, swapping the leg which came over the other. Will was, inexplicably and stupidly, annoyed. Why should Hannibal switch positions for the sake of comfort? He was not real enough to feel *discomfort.* “Nothing at all, Will. I am merely taking the liberty of pointing out the obvious. Well,” he scoffed, so quietly one might’ve missed it (if one weren’t Will), “what I had assumed was the obvious. Perhaps not so.”

“And, pray tell, Dr Lecter—what is the so called ‘obvious’?” In asking this, Will moved for the first time in what felt like hours—he lifted both hands off the armrests as to make quotation marks in the air.

“Merely that you have failed to run away from that which you had intended to leave behind without looking back—and yet, you do seem rather ignorant of this. You had intended to bury your past, and yourself with it—the Will Graham you had been once upon a time, not too long ago.” Hannibal paused. “You have attempted to elude me, and yet I’ve a designated armchair in your living room to call my own. You have surrounded yourself with ghosts of the past which you so detest, mere replicas and stand-ins as you deprave yourself of the *real thing,* so to say. Tell me, Will, is Katie an effective replacement for agent Katz?” A beat. “Can Eamonn fill Uncle Jack’s shoes?”

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When will woke up, it was with the most uncomfortable crick in the neck. He had nodded off sat upright in the armchair, which he’d apparently gotten into the habit of doing. And what a grand habit it was, in his old age.

Getting up felt tantamount to a rodent unsticking itself from a glue trap, his skin having painfully molded with the leather. He trudged down the hallway and into the kitchen. There was no lingering smell of coffee or breakfast. He glanced at the little digital clock on the oven—5:03. (Or was it 6? God fucking damn the person who’d invented daylight savings. He was *yet* to fix this—understandable, with so much on his mind.

And, honestly, did that person—Will was annoyed now, grasping for his phone and pulling up the search result—did mister George Vernon Hudson consider that it was an inconvenience and a nuisance at the best of times, and the very last straw at worst? Did he even *think* about Will when he made it up? Because it was *made up*, alright? It's not *real.*

Phone in hand, however, Will came to find it was, in fact, 6 in the morning. 6:06, to be exact.

Still. It didn't mean he couldn't be upset. He was really upset.)

Will was self-aware. He has always had that going for him. (He couldn't help reasserting this fact—at least he wasn't, you know, completely and wholly delusional in all ways that matter.) He knew, even with a fresh surge of anger simmering just under the surface (making his hands shake and shoulders quiver) that it wasn't about the stupid clock. Only, to be angry with the clock was a lot easier. To be angry with George Vernon Hudson was a lot easier. Easier than what? Well, the alternative.

He didn't even want to name the alternative. But he knew.

He set the phone down on the counter beside the (accursed) coffee machine. He contemplated day-drinking (morning-drinking? Sunrise-drinking?) for a second there, then reminded himself he was a grown man with a job (that he had to take the bus to in… less than thirty minutes), and that a coffee would have to do. They were out of *Ristretto*. He made *Arpeggio*. (He didn't really like it.)

The bus pulled up to the lonely, only stop near Will's house in a timely manner (shock and disbelief.) The absolute state of public transport in these parts was abysmal to say the least (and the country at large, obviously, but *especially* in bumfuck-nowhere places such as his little dilapidated haven in Wolf Trap)—the buses were perpetually late and overcrowded, making for a less-than-stellar environment for one Will Graham and the likes of him. The Ford Crown Victoria (God rest her soul) seemed like the height of luxury in comparison.

The bus was packed when Will boarded, and perhaps somebody pissed in the driver's cereal on this fine morning, because the man floored it the *second* those doors clicked shut—before Will even located a handle to grab onto, much less actually, well, managed to *grab* anything to prevent a very graceless descent. It was a feeling not unlike being slammed into the side of a cliff by the waves of a very ruthless sea—if the side of the cliff was a very tall, very broad, very tattooed and very bald man with the smallest, tiniest yorkie cradled in his arms. It actually wasn't even that far fetched of a comparison. The man indeed felt as hard and immovable as a rock. He leveled Will with an absolutely withering glare, and kept regarding him murderously until Will managed to scamper off further into the belly of the ~~beast~~ bus—after a muttered apology, or something approaching it. Frankly, he was in no state to string more than two syllables together.

He managed to find a nook to slot himself into near the back of the bus, between the very last pair of doors and the back of the vehicle, where he proceeded to do his very best to ignore the wall of heat and the mixture of various odors surrounding him.

More people boarded as they rattled down the embarrassingly awful roads (cracks in the asphalt and potholes aplenty), making it all the more congested. Will could feel the bus

shifting with each person's movement, hyperaware of all of it: the constant hum of the engine, the screeching brakes, and the loud chatter of passengers trying to be heard above it all. Even the smallest of discomforts grated on his senses: his bag poking into his side, someone's elbow brushing against his arm, the feeling of being pressed against the glass window. Shutting his eyes did him no favors, only really caused him to feel all the more disoriented. He settled on staring intently at his own hand, the one that had gripped the yellow railing like a vice.

He looked at his hand, for no particular reason.

He'd let his nails grow out quite a bit, hadn't he? He was only now noticing it, really. He hadn't meant to, he didn't think. He should have done something about it already—more than once a long nail had caught onto his skin while pulling up his trousers, or some such.

Will tapped against the metal handhold, feeling and picturing the noise more than hearing it (in these conditions.) A hollow sort of vibrato.

They elongated before his eyes. The nails, that is. Grew, right then and there, curving into off-white crescents that ended in a fine, sharp point. It was a decidedly elegant look; a sort of duality between grace and danger. Will wasn't very graceful, was he? Not by default, he didn't think. Dangerous? Depending on who you asked. In either case, the claws would decidedly be an upgrade. Gleaming like polished obsidian, embodying both beauty and peril.

Will entertained the thought, just then and there—he could hardly acquire *real* claws, of course. That was just his head, again messing with him. He knew that. He could tell (having had much practice.) But, he could leave these. Hell, let them grow out. A built-in weapon, yes; something worthy of being up against Hannibal's fangs.

Lovely as that idea may have been, Will dismissed the thought fairly quickly (and with it, his nails shrunk to their normal, everyman size.) He couldn't kid himself—teeth have always been more his speed, too.

Bloody claws meant blood wasted; he had this notion he'd like to taste it.

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The boatyard was abuzz with activity today, even more so than usual (and that was saying something.) It was apparent, beyond so, that the fishing season was upon them; fishermen and hobbyists alike flocked to the bay like flies to honey. Though overwhelming all the same in its own way, this atmosphere felt like a balm to Will's frayed nerves. It was a lot, but easy and familiar all the same. He relished in both the sound and the feeling of soaked, rotted wood of the docks squelching under his boots. He relished in the saltiness of the air brought by a perfectly refreshing breeze.

Returning into the repair shop, he witnessed the tail-end of a drop-off. A modestly-sized fishing boat, eased out of a trailer by, what, five guys? That was excessive, he thought. The thing had wheels. He could pick out the proverbial alpha of the pack almost straight away; he was the oldest by a significant amount, his age etched into the deep lines of his forehead and the grey-white tone of his long hair, only a couple of dark-brown patches remaining

throughout, near the bottom. Maybe he was stubbornly holding onto his youth, unwilling to cut them off for the sake of unity (as though he had to prove to the world that he *was,* at one point, and not so long ago, a brunet)—or maybe he just, honest to God, didn't care. His beard was long and very nearly entirely monochrome, clinging to his weathered face like seaweed clinging to a rocky shore. He was clad in a faded, salt-stained flannel that was so worn and frayed and beat that it rivaled some of the most ancient clothing items gathering dust and moth-holes in the bottommost drawers of Will's wardrobe. Upon his feet, a pair of excessively loud rubber boots.

Eamonn beckoned him over, as though Will hadn't already been approaching.

"What seems to be the issue, gents?" asked he, a clipboard in hand.

Seaweed Beard, as Will had settled on calling him (in his head, of course), cleared his throat before speaking. His voice, when it came out, was low and gravelly, as though it couldn't quite get past the man's throat. Each word emerged as a croaky, unpleasant sound. "Smoke comin' outta the exhaust e'ry time we start 'er. Real black, too."

A man of few words, then. Most of his sort tended to be. Will knew his sort very well.

"Oh, and—" one of the henchmen interjected, an index finger pointed up as he took a step forward where the grown-ups discussed matters. Will followed the length of his bare arm down to where it met his shoulder, recognizing the tattoos which adorned it from the bus this morning. Small world. "—been takin' a few tries to get 'er goin' of late. It cranks, but, uh, takes longer than usual—more than one try, sometimes."

Eamonn nodded sagely, his hand moving a-mile-a-minute as he took notes. Succinct and exact, Will knew, without needing to check.

The three men—Eamonn, Seaweed Beard, and Tattoo Guy, all look positively stricken with grief at the little boat's misfortune. Will wouldn't have been surprised had they asked whether she will survive or if there's a cure.

"Aye, sure, we won't know for certain until we've had a look under the hood, like. But, most likely, it'll be an improper air-to-fuel ratio. We'll check the air filter and the fuel system to make sure. Worst case scenario, the engine may be dead... but, by the looks of it, it can't be that old. Wouldn't be fretting over it, now."

"Lower-grade or contaminated diesel can contribute to black smoke emissions," Will spoke up, for the first time. Though he'd been stood there throughout the entirety of the conversation, either the men have become so invested into their boat's fate that they have tuned out everything but Eamonn himself, or they pegged him for a lackey of sorts, the mechanic's bellboy. Be that as it may, they looked at him with matching expressions of bewilderment, the sort you save for occasions such as finding yourself engaged in a conversation with talking frogs or looking skyward only to see a flock of flying pigs. "It's due to its lower combustion efficiency. Mediocre fuel is just more likely to contain impurities, higher levels of sulfur, or a lower cetane rating. In summary: you get what you pay for, really. You also get a fucked-up engine that can't complete its combustion process."

Will didn't bother pretending like he wasn't acutely aware that Tattoo Guy was staring at him. Like, hard. Like, *suspiciously.*

Whatever. Not like he'd stop doing his job because some guy couldn't bother with subtlety.

"*That* means that the fuel does not burn completely within the engine cylinders," he licked his lips, mouth a tad dry. "And, all that black smoke? Really, that's just all those partially burned fuel particles, or soot, being shot out of the exhaust system. It's not only about fuel efficiency, either—over time, it can and *will* damage the engine. Which could very well be the case here."

"Well, you boys'll know more than we do. And she," Seaweed Beard glanced at Katie, who could be just about seen and just about heard humming and swaying to Tanya Tucker's okayest hits behind the front counter. "Guess we'll be leavin' you to it."

"We'll stay in touch," Eamonn nodded, brandishing a little business card he'd produced from his pocket, "we'll run diagnostics and give you a bell, then further arrange things. That sound alright then, lads?"

Soon thereafter, having donned on their coveralls and rolled up their sleeves, Will and Katie found themselves in the thick of things. Will had assumed Eamonn would have definitely taken the job, but the old man had decided there were more pressing matters (the details of which hadn't been shared.) So, the two of them it was—once again. Not that Will was complaining—Katie was *really* good at what she did.

The air was thick with the scent of oil and determination as they set to work. Will closed his eyes, for a mere moment, inhaling deeply and getting a lungful of that musty air that should by rights make any normal person mildly ill at best or gag at worst. On the contrary, it made him feel more clear-headed than he'd felt in days.

Will watched her unscrew the air filter, and find that it was, indeed, clogged. Disassemblement ensued, his deft fingers being the ones tasked with the painstaking removal of the accumulated dirt and grime. He had the honors of setting the once-obscured filter back into place—he could already feel the impending improvement upon the airflow.

Katie was already examining the fuel lines while he'd been at it. Sure enough, the air filter was the least of their worries (which was the least shocking revelation Will has had in ages, as both the boat and the engine had the distinct aura of maybe having been maintained once, like, *ever.* Even that supposition was rather generous.)

Whatever the case, there was only here and now, which he ought to be focusing on.

"There's a blockage in one of the injectors," concluded Katie. Will gave it a sort of perfunctory look himself, a bit of a once-over just to be sure—but, for one, he didn't doubt Katie's diagnosis. For two, it would be a fucking shocker if there *weren't* a blockage, given the absolute state of things in this here engine compartment.

Will leaned forward, shoving his head in for a better look (practically kissing the damn thing.) A headlight illuminated the now considerably darker nook, what with half of him

inside. The pungent scent of diesel fuel cloyed his senses, made his eyes water the tiniest bit. He blinked the tears away, but didn't relent. A fine network of metal passages obscured by accumulated deposits was revealed soon thereafter, once Will carefully removed the offending piece of machinery. He examined the nozzle, faint light of his headlamp dancing across the surface, revealing the telltale signs of carbon buildup. A very effective way to impend the fuel flow.

Cleaning this bad boy up would be a process a mite more delicate than the cleaning of the filter, being that this piece was a lot smaller, a lot more frail, and required a specialized sort of tool. The entire process involved a combination of ultrasonic cleaning and pressurized solvent, atop a disassembly and reassembly.

Luckily, Will had a keen eye for these things, and the benefit of having been born with a wrench in one hand and a drill in the other, and an unshakeable determination (at least in this line of work.) It took him a little while to finish alright, and he hadn't even noticed the sun had begun to set.

Katie approached him in the back, by the locker rooms. She was already out of the mechanic get-up and in something decidedly more… polite-society-appropriate. Will, too, was beginning to look a little less grease-monkey and a little more basket-case-from-down-the-street. You know, the usual. The signature. Anyway, he wasn't sure whether he'd call it polite-society-appropriate, that'd be pushing it a little bit, but—point being, he was in his regular clothing: a vision in plaid and denim, thank you very much.

"Still up for hitting Mirage tonight, Graham?"

Will shut the locker with an unfortunately loud bang of metal against metal, then padlocked it for safety. "Yes, why do you ask?"

Katie shrugged, unpeeling herself from where she'd leaned against the wall and heading for the back door. "Dunno," she stuck her hands into the pockets of her hoodie; Will caught up, falling into step with her. "Just, y'know, I know you're a family man… some of your species prefer sitting at the dinner table around this time."

Will had, while she spoke, withdrawn a cigarette from the crumpled pack that he kept in his locker. The utter state of that little box gave away the fact he'd been carrying it around for a while, letting it get beat up in his pockets. He then pressed it into Katie's hand, and upon being relieved of it, he lit the cigarette he'd taken for himself. Closing his eyes after having taken a drag, he exhaled a billow of smoke—then watched the twirling patterns climb skyward, soon dissipating.

"Molly doesn't mind," he said, eventually. He liked the finality in his voice.

"Molly, is it? Your wife?" Katie looked at him curiously, head tilted and eyes wide like some strange sort of bird. It made her appear younger altogether—not that she wasn't already.

"Yes," he affirmed with a nod, though he must have sounded as confused as he felt in that moment.

“You’ve never told me her name,” Katie supplied.

Will furrowed his brows, “That’s not true.”

“It is,” Katie chuckled—or scoffed, perhaps, “You’re a very private person, Graham. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were in witness protection or something. Getting anything out of you is like pulling teeth.”

Will shrugged, not having much to say to that. Yes, she was correct. No, he wouldn’t change a thing about it. “I’m not a very interesting person,” he deflected.

“I wish you’d let me be the judge of that,” Katie chuckled, aiming for lighthearted but sounding uncomfortably sincere. An insecure little smile flittered about her lips, though her eyes evasively darted about in a truly dedicated attempt to avoid eye-contact.

They didn’t need eye-contact, really. Awkwardness had already settled in; what had initially been a subtle shift in the atmosphere has now morphed into something that’d normally have Will beelining for the nearest exit.

This pregnant pause hung heavy between them as they progressed down the street. Twin swirls of smoke intertwined above their heads on their way skyward, contrasting the actual state of affairs down below.

“I can’t,” said Will simply.

Katie’s shoulders sagged. Really, her whole body sort of deflated under the crushing weight of the rejection. She should’ve known better, thought Will.

He was practical like that. One wouldn’t get to live the life of Will Graham without mastering compartmentalization. Each aspect of his life was confined to its own domain, neatly organized and sealed off from the others. He was a walking collection of disparate fragments —a twitchy wreck, an accomplished mechanic, that one guy you sort of know that brings an unmistakably awkward energy wherever he goes, a pack leader (in the literal sense), a checked-out husband, something vaguely reminiscent of a father figure, a loser brushing his 40s that’s hitting the bar every night like a college kid.

He was all of those things, but never at once.

Hannibal needn’t more than a single person suit. Considering the suit’s charm and charisma and intellect and even its surprising measure of wisdom to round it all off, it was fit for most occasions. Much like the suits of his in a literal sense, this one, too, was bespoke. It had the uncanny ability to remain largely the same while subtly tailoring and retailoring itself, custom-made and remade within moments as its wearer adjusted his demeanor and disposition to any situation at hand.

Will, on the entirely different hand, hadn’t the luxury of all that. It was all so desperately out of reach, even the mere idea of it. The very best he could do is haphazardly put together several extremely unpolished person-suits, to don on and shed as needed. It was not ideal, but

nonetheless necessary. And so: the mechanic could not also be the acquaintance; the husband could not also be the bar rat.

He was a different person at work, with Katie, with Eamonn. He held himself differently, he smiled differently, he walked differently, even his quips were different. Different didn't mean better; nor did it mean worse, really. Just… *different.* And it wouldn't do, allowing that part of his life, of himself, to merge with the part occupied by Molly and Walter. It wouldn't do at all.

It'd be an overstatement to say, on top of all this, that it all amounted to one great disadvantage that could be summed up in a couple of words: it was difficult to keep track of who he was. He was a stranger to himself, something ephemeral, incorporeal. Utterly detached from the self, other. Not detached from the self, for there was no self to begin with. He was a concept, an unfinished theory, a hypothesis, a collective hallucination had by everybody who claimed to have met him.

He emitted a peculiar sort of sound, something vaguely close to a laugh (he thought he sounded rather like a weird sort of bird), at his own pondering. How rich, how presumptuous, of *him* to say that.

(There *were* moments when he'd felt real, material, non-fluid and perceivable. To acknowledge this, them, was dangerous. That Will even had this idea meant a degree of acknowledgement, but he could—and would—pretend otherwise.)

"Will? Did I say something…?"

Had Katie said anything? He hadn't noticed, too immersed in his own line of thought.

"What? No, sorry. Just, uh," he waved a hand vaguely through the air, attempting to dismiss the subject. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. What were you saying?"

"Nothing, nothing," she shrugged it off, sticking both hands into her pockets upon finishing her cigarette. Whatever it was, it'd made her face gently pink. Will was grateful for the privilege of remaining ignorant to whatever display of emotion Katie had seen fit to partake in. If she had done so at all; perhaps she was just getting… winded from the walk. Sure.

They'd arrived to the bar just then. And thank the heavens for it.

Both of them seemed a little grateful for the familiar environment and crystal-clear expectations of behavior in such an environment. Will unclenched his jaws as he passed the threshold, relaxed his hands, rolled his shoulders back.

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"You're on the verge of impressing me. Drive it home, Graham," Katie laughed, head thrown back as she downed the very last of the liquor in her glass. A hand raised, she signaled the bartender for another.

Will, despite himself, found himself laughing alongside (cheeks flushed, eyelids heavy, the whole shebang.) Loosened inhibitions and all that. (Good thing he, more often than not, did not retain these memories.) “It’s not very impressive altogether,” he shook his head, then (though he hadn’t moved an inch) grabbed the edge of the table, knuckles-white. He’d had the nastiest feeling he was three seconds away from toppling over. “I quit before finishing my training.”

Katie nudged him, “Bah, I was just pulling your leg. C’mon, a detective in training and you already solved your first case? All by yourself?”

“It wasn’t *all by myself,*” he emphasized, “but… well, I *did* do most of the proverbial heavy lifting.”

“There you go, that’s- that’s basically what I was getting at, anyway,” Katie was quick to sip from her re-filled glass, “So, why’d you quit, anyway?”

(So much about compartmentalization, and all that; apparently, he could compartmentalize jack shit with a few drinks in him.)

“It’s a long story.”

“It’s a long night.”

Will sighed, surrendering. He finished the whiskey he’d been nursing. “I just wasn’t cut out for homicide. It was one thing to trail detectives who left you with the paperwork at the end of a case. Another thing to pull the trigger. Evidently I couldn’t do that until… well… later.”

“Oh, I see,” Katie’s brows furrowed.

“Got shot in the shoulder for my efforts,” he huffed a laugh, recalling the shock and the pain of it all. He’d been hurt a lot more in the recent years. A bullet in the shoulder seemed just short of laughable now. “The captain wanted me to stick around, actually, but, um, I went into teaching instead.”

“Seriously? You, a teacher?”

“What, like it’s that hard to believe?”

“Well, yes.”

Will inclined his head. Fair enough. Besides, he still had the sense not to dissuade her from the notion he was a school teacher, or something like it. He didn’t exactly feel like spilling the proverbial beans about his stint at the FBI. He was giving away too much already.

Will caught a movement in his peripheral vision, but by the time he’d turned his head (heavy as it was), a man had already approached him. It took Will a second to realize he could recognize him.

“Will Graham?” Tattoo Guy—without so much as a *hello* or *how do you do*—sort of groused. Like it was an awful inconvenience, and Will’s fault, that he had to approach him and talk to

him.

Will stared up at him quizzically. “Excuse me?”

“You’re excused. S’you Will Graham or no?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Me.”

Will’s eyes flickered to the man’s hands—no longer occupied by the yorkie, they were holding a phone, the device looking comically small in his giant hands. He was glancing back and forth, from the screen to Will and back again, the flesh sausages attached to his hands furiously typing away. He huffed (annoyed) several times, furiously pressing (presumably) backspace. Must’ve mashed several keys with those fingers.

Will abruptly sobered up, and made a move to stand. He wasn’t feeling good about this. Not at all. He glanced at Katie, who had gone mute while observing the interaction. “Let’s go.”

Tattoo Guy let them leave without a hitch. In hindsight, there was nothing he could’ve done short of entering a physical altercation if he wanted to prevent them from leaving. In the moment, however, flight or fight engaged, Will felt rather differently.

-

When Will awoke, it was on the couch of an unfamiliar living room. He spotted Katie’s bag and bandana on the coffee table beside it.

He very vaguely recalled the repeat of her offer that he stay the night. He could also vaguely recall his bizarre acquiesce to it. Up until last night, he’d never not splurged on a taxi to take him home from the bar.

Much to think about.

A movement in the corner of the room caught his attention. Hannibal, perched on the windowsill, gazing outside. He looked thoughtful, as though his mind were adrift in contemplation. Somehow, Will doubted that.

Will’s doubts were, indeed, confirmed. The moment he shifted on the couch, Hannibal’s head turned, eyes landing on him. It felt like a blow.

“You ought to head home.”

Will, getting up, was far too tired and far too hungover to enter another crisis about this very disturbing turn of events. “Fuck off,” he muttered, without heat. He wandered around like a headless fly for a hot second, attempting to locate his shoes. They were by the front door (shocker.) “Like you’re one to talk. Last time I checked, we’re not in Baltimore. You’re further from home than I am.”

“Am I?”

Will didn’t say anything to that.

Chapter End Notes

when i said "updates on fridays/saturdays" apparently i lied butttt this chapter took so unbelievably long. anyway i solemnly swear i will be on schedule from now on (unless im lying again idkkk *twirls hair*)

maroon

Chapter Notes

pleaseeeeee heed the tags !!! it's about to get bloody

Walking down the driveway into the street, phone in hand and eyes on the screen, Will had the passing thought that he could not hear Hannibal move behind him. Knowing that Hannibal was, in fact, following (unable to hear him, he could *sense* him) and not too far behind, Will couldn't shake the notion that this was not so different to the Hannibal he had last seen… a long time ago. It had taken him a long time to learn that Hannibal would only be heard if he expressly wanted to be. The man was like a cat. Like an oversized, suited-up, two-legged, blond cat. Twice as annoying as one. Twice as dangerous, too.

Had no one ever thought to put a bell on him?

The mental image made him chuckle.

Having nothing better to do while waiting around for the taxi he'd called, Will looked at him. Hannibal looked back.

There was something so different about him now. Out here, in the daylight. No longer concealed by the thick shadows of Will's house, no longer made so much more pallid by the moonlight. No longer the boogeyman from beneath Will's bed, no longer something he could still try to convince himself was some sort of an elaborate, paranoia-induced dream.

Will wouldn't go so far as to say this was the good doctor himself in the flesh, but… it was damn close to it.

"So, how'd you escape?" Will huffed, attempting to appear as annoyed as he felt.

Hannibal raised his perfectly-shaped eyebrows, as though Will had asked something entirely ludicrous. As though it was a total shocker that Will wasn't dropping to his knees and self-flagellating right then and there for his idiocy. "Excuse me, Will—escaped? Wherever from?"

Will huffed again, putting more oomph into it this time, really driving the point home (point being that Hannibal was a massive pain in the ass.) "I don't know. The bedroom, the house. You keep… slithering through the cracks of your confinements."

(Or, he had been gracious enough to allow Will the comfort of the illusion that he could do anything at all to evade him. Run and hide (as he was so fond of doing) and hope and pray it'd do the trick.)

"I assure you, I do not slither."

Will threw his hands up, “Oh, I’m so sorry. You keep gracefully prancing past the bounds of your confinements. Better?”

Hannibal smiled. “Better.”

Will groaned.

“With your gracious indulgence,” (seriously? Who spoke like that? Was Hannibal pulling his leg?), “Allow me to answer your question. With any luck, sufficiently.”

Will rubbed his face in the manner of a man attempting to take it clean off. He muttered something closely resembling ‘spare me’.

Hannibal ignored him.

“Are you so naïve as to think I have the capability of appearing at whims of my own, come and go as I please? Do not mistake me for something supernatural, Will. All this,” Hannibal gestured at himself, “is all your doing. I am here because you would have me here. You must endeavor to reconcile this simple truth with yourself.”

“I am beyond reconciliation with myself.”

“Yes, well,” Hannibal clasped both hands behind his back, “It does take some measure of patience to accomplish.”

The taxi, blessedly, chose this moment to show up. Will scrambled into the back. Hannibal elegantly followed suit.

“Shouldn’t you fuck off?” Will glared, “I don’t recall paying the fare for two.”

The taxi driver turned abruptly, “You paid for one, sir—are we picking up friends along the way?”

Will startled. “I’m s- oh. Oh, no, sorry, I was talking to someone else,” he motioned at his ear, as though it contained an ear-piece (which could have been covered by his slightly overgrown hair—you know, if it were there in the first place.) The driver, a stout and needlessly cheerful middle-aged man, thumbs-up’ed him and looked back at the road ahead.

Hannibal made no sound, but he was smiling—which was as good as full on gloating, in Hannibal-speak.

Will’s face tightened, jaw clenched. He lifted a hand, pressing a finger to the inexistent ear-piece. “Yes, Sally, thank you. Listen, be a lamb and tell him to fuck off. Yeah. Yes. He’s overstayed his welcome. I don’t want to see him set a foot in my office- in fact, tell him he should steer clear of the building altogether.” Pause. “A restraining order? It mightn’t be a bad idea. I’ll look into it. Thanks, again. Bye-bye.”

Hannibal was looking at him. Again. Will resolutely kept his eyes on the back of the passenger’s seat. The fabric seemed worn, with quite a few sloppily stitched tears in it. Lighter in patches too, sun-bleached.

“Do believe me, Will, when I say that I’d like nothing more than to leave you alone if you do not desire my company.” Somehow, Will doubted that. “Yet, as I have said—my hands are tied, in a manner of speaking. The decision is not mine to make.”

Will ignored him.

-

Will would continue ignoring him all the way to Wolf Trap, suffering through the forty-some minute cab ride in the tensest, most awkward silence he’s ever been put through. Just when it was becoming almost too unbearable, just as Will was debating the possibility of flinging himself out the vehicle and surviving to tell the tale, they pulled over.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire: Molly sat on the porch, curled up on the steps. Looking worse for wear.

She was already on her feet when Will shut the door of the car, and the same drove off. He looked up at her, she looked down at him. She was angry, visibly, and he… indifferent to the anger, mostly.

“Where have you been?” she asked tersely.

“You know where I’ve been.”

“Why haven’t you come home? I was worried sick, Will.”

“The circumstances didn’t allow it.”

“What *circumstances*? What could the *circumstances* possibly have been that you couldn’t even- I don’t know, couldn’t have even called? Texted? I know these days you prefer relinquishing the benefits of modern technology, but you don’t *get* to do that here. Not about this.” She wasn’t shouting, in fact, Molly’s voice was uncharacteristically low; even so, she spoke a mile a minute, disallowing Will to get a word in edgewise. “Who were you with?”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters,” she hissed, “and even if it *didn’t* matter, you’d still owe me the information.”

Will blinked. “I would *owe* you?”

“Yes!” she raised her voice now, “Yes, goddamn you, you would owe me that. I’m your *wife,* you owe me much more than that—even if I don’t collect that debt.”

Will shifted where he stood, then made a move towards the steps. Fine—whatever. If it mattered to her. “I was with Katie. I stayed over at Katie’s.”

“…Katie?”

“Katie. From work.”

“I know who Katie is,” Molly sniffed, every line of her face hard. “You stayed at hers?”

“Yes. That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

Molly nodded. She turned on her heel and disappeared into the house.

He followed her. What else was there to do?

Molly was pacing the living room when Will walked in. Arms crossed over her torso, she seemed to be following a path only she herself could see. There was a jittery sort of energy about her, in line with the way she moved—so Will thought that was fair enough.

Will dug deep within himself, blindly groping through those dark, dusty corners to find something resembling Molly’s husband. Or the husband Molly should’ve had. He put him on, buttoned the suit up over himself. When he spoke, his voice reflected a husband’s worry. “Look… I’m sorry. We were drinking, time just slipped away from me.”

The pacing ceased abruptly as Molly came to a standstill. Though they were about the same height, when their eyes met, she looked… exceptionally small. Her voice was small, too. “Are you really sorry?”

No. “Yes.”

With a nod, her arms fell weakly at her sides. Tension still lingered in the air around them. Will felt as though they existed in a small bubble, the air of which crackled with an invisible charge. He could almost visualize the shimmering boundary separating them from the world, from the rest of the house. The peculiar feeling left him sort of anxious, all of a sudden, as though an otherworldly force had woven a protective, yet isolating, shield around him. A shield as much as a confine.

In that charged moment, Will reached out, gently cupping her cheek. He half-expected static to zap his fingers as they made contact with Molly’s skin. (It didn’t.)

Perhaps Molly saw that Will was not brave enough to finish what he’d set out to do. She closed the distance between them, lips meeting in a hesitant kiss.

A sense of obligation compelled Will to remain still, leaning in instead of pulling back. There was *Molly* all around him, all over him—her hands on Will’s upper arms, clutching desperately; her natural scent, as well as that of her shampoo, becoming the only smells he could be aware of. He could even feel the beat of her heart as her chest pressed against his—rapid, exhilarated. He pushed down the unease.

Seconds dragged on; the kiss felt as though it lasted an eternity.

Molly held onto him like an animal starved. In a sense, Will supposed, she was. Starved of affection. Love, maybe. Companionship. In that way, he thought, they had a lot in common. ‘Starved’ was the first word he’d use to describe himself.

When he felt Molly’s fingers untuck the shirt out of his jeans and dip below, pressing against bare skin, the sense of obligation grew tenfold.

Marital duties, and all that.

-

It was going well.

… which felt, all-around, like a ridiculous thought to have given the circumstances. Yet it was the very one which passed through Will's head as he allowed his body to move on autopilot; gliding his hands up and down Molly's thighs (smooth as satin, velvety-soft—would have made any other man's fingertips linger); lips flush with where she needed them most, seldom parting from her; her hands in his hair (*always* in his hair), gripping and tugging and pressing him down (as if he could *possibly* be any closer—but he understood: to her, he could never be close enough—not now. Not ever, maybe.)

He did right by her in the same manner a parched man does right by a glass of cold water.

She keened like a wounded animal. Will dug his nails into her skin, leaving red crescents in their wake.

He knew when to lift his head, pull back—when her hands relented, when he could no longer feel the press of her legs against either ear. He watched, from where he knelt, the way her chest rose and fell, like the gentle swell of ocean waves upon the shore. She was so still now, no longer trembling or assailed by a random spasm of the muscles. One might think her asleep.

The flush of her skin, the rosy tint to her face, her neck, her chest, gave her away. As did the sheen of sweat which covered her, which made her appear glass-like in the dim light of a single nightlamp. Porcelain-like, statuesque. Like something carved from a single slab of marble in the ancient times. Museum-worthy.

Beautiful, decidedly erotic—but, ultimately, merely something to look at, perhaps even admire and contemplate the artistry and skill of her sculptor.

It had the very same effect on Will that such a sculpture might, in any case. (Which is to say, *little.*)

He crawled up her body, observed the way she lay pliant, unmoving, unafraid.

Her neck was still battered (and would persist in being so) from his earlier ministrations. Reds and purples mottled it lengthwise—blood vessels ruptured by Will's mouth alone. This enticed him far more than the mere sight of them, their origin rousing more intrigue than the marks themselves.

Almost entranced, he pressed his lips to a large crimson splotch just above Molly's collarbone.

He wasn't sure if the sounds of sizzling flesh were real or whether he alone could hear them; it didn't really matter anymore—all Will knew was that he could hear them, loud and clear with a deafening quality to them; as though his mouth were a branding iron.

There were fingers in his hair again, pushing down ever so gently—and Will would not think twice about it, if it weren't for the fact he could see, in his periphery, that Molly's hands lay limp by her head.

He pushed himself up abruptly, disturbed.

He locked eyes with one Hannibal Lecter. That this made him less disturbed, debatably, was disturbing on its own.

The man wasn't… well, naked, but it was almost as good as; he was lacking the suit jacket meant to match his trousers, and it seemed as though he'd forgone the tie (unheard of, shocking. Will was not used to seeing him without *something* around his neck—be it a tie or rope or hands.) Sneakily glancing down, Will found Hannibal's shirt was untucked, too. Even a little *wrinkled.* In short, this was nothing short of a state of an absolute disarray.

"What… " he couldn't find the words. He stared, slack-jawed.

"Will?" Molly murmured, a hand rubbing her eyes, "Is everything okay?"

Hannibal pressed a finger to his own lips, the universal 'shh'—

—and pushed Will's head down again, and Will let him, and Will went, and Will branded Molly's neck again, and again.

And once more.

Her legs spread. Will was hyperaware of Hannibal's hand, now on the nape of his neck, scalding. A branding iron in its own right.

He couldn't… *think,* his thoughts a whirlwind, his desire suddenly behemothic and so *tangible,* such that it felt as though it became too great to be contained by his body—like lukewarm water brought to a boil and overflowing the pot which held it. He felt Hannibal's hand trail down his back, fingers as though caressing each vertebra as they went. He had the sudden thought, the fleeting idea, that Hannibal might tear his spine out—if he wanted to. Somehow, it did not do much in the ways of quelling the *want.*

The *want* that had his interest piqued enough to sink into Molly, because she was right there, because she was the next best thing to be inside of, because he needed… he *needed,* and really, that was all he could think about—the single word rattling around in his skull like a pebble in a tin-can.

Hannibal was saying… something, but it wasn't loud enough to be heard above the high-pitched ringing in his ears. His words drifted away, almost, muffled and indistinct. Will could only make out the timbre of his voice, listen to each intonation and every pause—its cadence like a symphony, a sonorous melody that wrapped around Will's senses, engulfed him utterly.

Will found himself hyperaware of Molly's pulse, in the midst of it all, right there where his face remained pressed against the side of her neck. He couldn't tell with any certainty whether he was imagining it, or whether such a thing could truly be felt. Still, it seemed to

him just as real as Hannibal's hand on him (now much further down, on the back of his thigh), just as real as the inner heat of Molly's body. It seemed futile to dwell on it.

Saliva pooled in his mouth with every beat of her heart he could feel against his lips, tongue thick, the *want* thicker, the desire ugly, the impulse unmitigable. She moaned when he bruised her anew, whimpered when the blunt surface of his teeth dragged across the now-raw flesh.

He hadn't meant to…

—and yet when a trickle of blood touched his tongue, his jaw came down harder, and the body beneath him spasmed, and he lapped at the coppery substance like a dog, and they reached release in tandem, and as they lay panting, Will wondered when was it that Hannibal had dug the teeth of his own so deep that they became Will's own, which is to say, when had Will learned to love the way Hannibal loved, which is to say—when had love become synonymous with devouring?

(Later, he would wonder whether something so violent was love at all.)

(Even later, he would think it was.)

(The day after, he would figure it could be no other way.)

But now, in this very moment, he was facing the open wound on Molly's neck and the emptiness of their bedroom—Hannibal was gone.

-

The ringing in his ears began desisting while Will was in the bathroom, rummaging through the cabinet beneath the sink for the first aid kit he was only somewhat certain they had. It *felt* like a thing they ought to have, given the… *everything.*

He ended up finding it.

Something had changed in the handful of minutes that had passed between his departure from the bedroom and his return to it. The silence had changed, the air in the room. It was the sudden, unsettling absence of sound that seemed to have swallowed all noise in its wake. The usual creaks of floorboards beneath his feet, and the distant hum of appliances were conspicuously absent. The gentle rustling of curtains from a breeze outside would have been a relief, but there was nothing; not even the rhythmic ticking of that clock. The room felt frozen in time, like a forgotten sanctum, maybe, or the opposite of it.

Each breath felt amplified—both of their breaths.

Molly was no longer on the bed; she had approached the full-length mirror (which stood beside that goddamn clock). Her neck craned, she was trying to get a good look at the bloody mess on her neck. It wasn't so bad. It had stopped bleeding by now.

Will came up to her from the back. She jumped when a hand touched her shoulder.

“Sorry,” she murmured, apologetic. An embarrassed flush spread across her cheeks. Will did not think she ought to be embarrassed—it was nothing short of a natural reaction. He *had* bit her. “Is that for the…?”

“Yes,” he lifted the small plastic container. It was a yellowish sort of color with a red cross in the middle. Most certainly, it had been white once. When Will cracked it open, he found that it had been used in the past—a couple of items were opened or missing; but, no matter—what they needed had remained.

“Sit,” he nodded at the bed.

She obliged.

She also spared the bedroom door a fleeting glance. Will figured she *might* bolt, even if she didn’t seem to be aware of the possibility. It was all up in the air as yet, anyway—there was no way of knowing whether the human rationale would override the primal instinct.

Still—Will did not sit down between his wife and her way out. He chose the spot nearer the window.

Molly’s breathing was shallow. Her eyes darted around the room, dimly lit and a little ominous. He could’ve turned a light on. Something made him dislike the notion.

The bite was raw and crimson and Will’s.

As he carefully unwrapped a sterilized bandage, Will cleaned the wound with a damp cloth, the touch of his fingers sending a shiver down Molly’s spine. With a practiced hand, he applied a layer of antiseptic ointment. Molly winced, likely from the sting of it. She bit her lip, as though determined not to cry out. Will was, in a weird sort of way, almost proud of the brave face.

He took care to wrap the bandage snugly but not too tightly.

“You’ve… hah, really gone at it, haven’t you?” Molly tried to huff a little laugh, fingers gingerly brushing over the bandage.

“I hadn’t meant to.” And that was true enough.

“It’s okay,” Molly shrugged, the hand dropping.

Will could not tear his eyes away from her neck. Not when the bandage had become dark in the middle, fresh blood having soaked into the gauze. He had missed a couple of droplets and streaks in his original pass with the wet cloth, those that had travelled further down from the wound’s immediate surrounding area.

He leaned forward with an eerie sort of calmness, pressing a gentle kiss to the skin above the collar bone. A flick of his tongue, and the blood was no more. Another kiss to Molly’s jaw. He was close enough to smell what the bandage hid.

There aren't enough words in the English language to sufficiently describe the sheer strength of will he'd dredged up in that moment just to pull away.

(He could feel his *teeth* ache.)

-

Will hoped he was speaking quietly enough as not to be heard by anyone else at the repair shop—other than a certain runaway psychiatrist.

(The psychiatrist who would claim he *hadn't* run away from anywhere, but Will would beg to differ; he'd liked it much better back when he could be certain that the risk of meeting Hannibal was limited to the nighttime—and Will's house.

And now, the bastard was pestering him at work. He knew what Hannibal would say—that *Will* was the one wanting him there. Once again, Will would beg to differ—there were few things in life he'd like less. In fact, on that very list, 'suffering Hannibal's company at work' came just above 'being doused in gasoline and thrown into a fire' but just below 'being stomped on and squashed by a comically large elephant.)

"Some might say a bite such as that might imply ownership," Hannibal mused, perched on the side of a small fishing boat Will was working on.

He paused a moment, genuinely contemplating (—in itself, fucked up.) "I don't think that's right."

"You don't?"

"No," he shook his head, droplets of sweat flying everywhere (ew, gross.) "I don't feel compelled to own Molly. The prospect doesn't interest me."

"Would you have bit anybody else, had they been in that situation instead?"

Another pause. "Yes."

"Perhaps, then, merely the fulfillment of a certain *l'appel du vide*?"

"Not that, either," Will tightened a screw here, a bolt there, "It'd imply distress. It doesn't distress me. Well… not at this point, at least."

"It doesn't distress you?"

"No. That's what I said, isn't it?"

"Indeed so," Hannibal clasped his hands, "How beautiful, that you have come to delight in bloodshed."

Will, utterly baffled and bewildered by the statement, made the sudden move to stand up straight—he started, really, was the word—and thus bumped his head into the hull. (And yelped. Loudly.)

“I don’t- no. That’s not it.”

“Is it not? I’ve merely rephrased your insinuation.”

“I’ve insinuated jack shit.”

“I would not agree. You have all but stated so outright—save for a few paper-thin layers of euphemism.”

“I don’t even know why I’m talking to you about this,” Will groused (deflected.)

“Why, indeed,” Hannibal intoned dryly, “given the vast arsenal of shoulders to cry on at your disposal.”

“I’m not in the business of scaring people away.” ‘Again’ was left unsaid.

“For what it is worth,” Hannibal rolled back his shoulders, “I’m still here.”

-

As Will turned the doorknob, the enticing smell of a home-cooked meal wafted through the air. It was… untypical. Their lunchtimes (or dinnertimes) did not tend to overlap, given the extent to which their work hours differed. Molly occasionally cooked, and when she did, it was a two-person affair—herself and Wally. Will relied on gas-station burritos in the ways of nourishment. (Although, granted, he was the one on breakfast duty most days.)

The food was already on the table when he walked into the dining room—savory beef stew with tender chunks of meat and hearty vegetables. He must have looked as confused as he felt—Molly immediately offered an explanation. Or something approaching one.

“I thought it’d be nice,” she smiled weakly.

“It seems… nice.”

“Well,” she cleared her throat, “good, then. Go on, have a seat.”

Walter, who had already been in his chair by the time Will had joined them, eyed him wearily. They filled their plates in silence while Molly finished up in the kitchen.

The rest of the evening resumed in the very same spirit, which is to say, on the wrong side of a little too awkward for comfort, but not awkward enough for either of them to give up the ghost. Molly had even kissed his cheek before joining them—which, though not *that* unusual, felt distinctly too saccharine given the context.

Even Walter seemed to have noticed that something was… off. The kid was even quieter than usual, pushing the food around his plate in the manner of somebody drained of all appetite. He kept stealing covert glances at his mother, and then he’d look significantly at Will, as though seeking answers with his eyes alone.

Will wished he could give them—but, alas.

Newspaper lay open just beside them. A homicide on the front page. Jack's face looking back at him.

Will dropped his eyes to the steaming bowl of stew.

-

At bedtime, Will did the usual—he headed to the living room.

Molly intercepted him halfway there.

"Aren't you coming upstairs?"

Momentarily, he really hadn't the first idea what to say. "Er… no, I was going to watch some TV before bed… so…" he gestured lamely in the vague direction of the living room. (It was a poor excuse; he couldn't even tell you where the remote was.)

Molly seemed to note it was a poor excuse. She didn't bristle, but did wilt ever so slightly. "Oh."

"Yeah." Will muttered, then added (an afterthought): "Sorry."

"It's okay," she brushed it off, rubbing one of her arms, "I just thought… nevermind. I'll… I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow," he acquiesced.

She nodded. "Good night."

"Night."

He resumed his journey downstairs.

Hannibal was already lying in wait, comfortable in that very same armchair. Legs crossed, an arm on each armrest. Will couldn't abandon the imagery of a throne.

"She would have liked you to join her," he observed.

"Yup."

"She might have been angling for a repeat of your earlier coupling."

Will cringed at the phrasing (Jesus). "Yup."

"You are indifferent?"

"It does not concern me."

Hannibal watched him silently. Will allowed it. He returned the gaze, unabashed.

"Why did you marry her?"

“We both needed each other at the time. She needed someplace to drop the anchor. I needed to move on.”

“You would say you have moved on?”

“I wouldn’t say that at all,” he shrugged, an open book, “There is no such thing. Moving on, I mean. One doesn’t move on. One runs away.”

“Have you done so successfully?”

“I’d like to think so,” Will sighed, “but I’m not naïve.”

A stretch of silence.

“Are you still bothered by what you’d done?”

“More intrigued than bothered.”

“Intrigued?”

“Yes. Quite like you, isn’t it?”

“You flatter me so.”

Will grinned, mirthless, “Most would not find that to be flattery, Doctor. Closer to an insult.”

“I am not *most*, dear Will.”

“That you aren’t,” Will sighed, again.

“We persist in our blurring, it seems.”

“*Isn’t that how you found me*—and all that” Will echoed his own words, those he had uttered before Botticelli’s *Primavera*.

“Florence seems so long ago.”

Will inclined his head, “We were different men then.”

“Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know,” he shrugged, casting a look out the window, locking eyes with the moon again. “I think I loved you then.”

Will felt it, just as the words left his mouth—unrestrained and unfiltered: he had taken a step off a metaphorical cliff. Perhaps a cliff he’d been dancing atop for weeks now. A single step though it was, it was one he could not take back. He could not undo its fatal consequence. He could only plunge into the cold sea below.

Hannibal remained silent for a suspiciously long while. Will watched his reflection in the glass. His eyes had closed. They’d remained closed for more than a handful of seconds.

“You do not love me now?”

“I don’t know.” A Pause. “I still meant what I had said,” he reiterated—for the second time in the past weeks. It made him feel better, to say that. To affirm it. To utter the words and believe them.

“That is a separate issue.”

“You’re right,” he relented. Then: “But, I still don’t know.”

“What of eating my heart?”

“What of it?”

“You haven’t done it yet.”

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“It would kill you.”

“Would it? I defy the laws of physics.”

“It’s still a risk.”

“A risk you’re uncomfortable taking?” Hannibal’s brows climbed into his hairline, “My, Will, should you resume in this manner, it might lead me to believe you do not detest my presence so.”

Will grit his teeth.

Then he stood.

Then he crossed the room.

Then he hovered above Hannibal.

Then he plunged his hand into the pocket of the man’s jacket and fished out a scalpel (of course it’d be there—the sick fuck) (perhaps it said something about Will as well, his certainty he’d find it there.)

Hannibal could only be described as a cat who got the cream. Will felt rather good about being annoyed by this, by Hannibal’s pleasure; it was reassuring to know he hadn’t lost the plot just yet.

But Hannibal wouldn’t make this easy on Will. Why would he ever?

Luckily for him, Will hadn’t yet lost his momentum.

Suffice to say he was not gentle nor careful when it came to unbuttoning the jacket, and then the shirt below (burgundy—eyeroll.)

And—fine. *Fine,* he entertained the thought for a moment and not a second longer; a glance was made at Hannibal's very empty lap whilst Will was attempting to figure out the logistics. A glance and perhaps a fleeting thought, but no more. As far as Will was concerned, it was tantamount to taking a seat on a bear trap. No can do.

He bent a leg and set a knee on the armrest. The other stood sturdy between Hannibal's. A hand on the armchair's back, the other gripping the thin silver tool. Will watched the way Hannibal's chest rose and fell. He listened intently—to no avail. Something in him wished he could catch the sound of the doctor's heartbeat. The way he had heard Molly's.

He set the blade against Hannibal's sternum, breathing in tandem with him. A trickle of blood sped down his chest when Will finally pressed. The cut was small, and when Will removed the scalpel, he watched the red pool in the little white slit before joining the very first droplets in their cascade downward. (Their journey, though, was rather cut short by the chest-hair.)

"That won't get you anywhere, Will," Hannibal intoned, sounding almost bored (but Will knew better than to believe that.) "You ought to, shall we say, put some elbow grease into it."

"And *you* ought to be quiet," Will huffed, "I might change my mind. Cut your throat, instead," Will gently pressed the blade against it. He could feel Hannibal swallow against the metal. "Or your tongue. *That* you'd hate more, wouldn't you?"

Hannibal didn't respond, but his eyes twinkled.

Will resumed the task at hand.

He made a deeper, longer incision, then. One which had Hannibal wincing (Will was not sure how *feeling* worked for Hannibal. He was disturbingly stoic for a man being sliced into, and yet it seemed as though he could feel *some* of it.)

(Or, perhaps, as this was Will's imagination, *he* wanted Hannibal to feel it.)

(Definitely something to ponder over at a more convenient time.)

Blood flowed freely now. It gushed with abandon, like a waterfall cascading down a cliffside —like water bursting from a narrow crack in a rocky mountain face with unyielding force. The thick liquid shimmered and glistened in the moonlight—and depending on how the light caressed its surface, it appeared both inky and crimson, metamorphosizing into each shade on that spectrum. It was mesmerizing.

The scalpel dropped to the hardwood floor with a dull thud.

Will took a deep breath.

Then he reached inside.

He braved the maze of organs and ribs, groping his way through Hannibal's chest cavity rather blindly. It took several tries, several bumps into a lung here or a bone there. But, at once, he knew the moment he'd reached his target.

Hannibal's heart pulsated in his hand.

And in holding that heart, Will plucked out an epiphany from the whirlwind in his mind. The one thought which outshone the rest, the one which he could make out with perfect clarity.

This was real. This had to be real.

No one could split a man open, feel the persistent and unyielding beat of the one organ which was synonymous with life, smell the blood that had been spilled in pursuit of it, and disbelieve the authenticity of that man's existence. No one. Certainly not Will.

Will, for the first time in a long time, could not meet Hannibal's eyes.

He could feel the weight of the man's look. He felt the pressure of it upon himself. (Think shoulders. Think Atlas.)

He was not a strong enough man to take it.

His hand twisted, then jerked back.

The organ tore itself out with a squelch.

Will could look at it now.

And look he did.

And looked.

And looked.

And looked.

His fist was firmly closed around it, squeezing. It was gratifying to watch all that blood it was holding ooze out. Down Will's hand, coating his fingers. Would it be a little too on the nose to say he could finally visualize all that blood on his hands?

Like a glove.

Though a glove stopped at the wrist. Will knew he was wholly stained and dripping.

He was only peripherally aware of all the saliva pooled in his mouth at the sight.

And then: he bit down.

And he bit hard.

Not unlike one of Molly's steaks, the first bite was a revelation—tender meat yielded to his teeth; copper burst upon his taste buds.

He did not need to look to know that Hannibal's expression could only be that of pure delight.

Will's knees buckled. He gripped the armchair, a measly sort of attempt to remain upright.

Each subsequent bite was an exquisite experience. It should have been savored, enjoyed patiently—but, Will did not have the capacity for either. He glutted on the organ like an animal starved (*starved,* always starved, only starved), and he knew in that moment that each meal thereafter would could only be a meager mimicry of the only thing that could truly nourish him.

Yet he was ready to walk the world hungering every day hereafter.

-

When the dawn came and sunlight spilled into the living room, it found Will splayed on his back, on the carpet. It found Will soaked to the bone with sweat. His rapid, irregular breaths were the only signs of life in the room. (The dogs? They flittered about outside, in the hallway, pacing in circles and weakly whining—but they would not come inside.)

Walter, as ever, stood in the door with them. He watched the crumpled mess that was Will mutely, with an expression of utter indifference etched into his young features. A child ought to be disturbed. This child was not.

The boy took the first, brave step into the room. He walked around the sitting area, to one of the bookshelves. He selected a bag of treats at random.

He should have left right away, both this haunted room and the house itself (the dogs needed taking out, of course.) Something stopped him just before Will's stone-still form.

Walter grabbed one of Molly's blankets off the nearest armchairs—and his eyes widened at the sight of a long gash splitting apart the leather down the middle. The stuffing, its guts, peeked out.

He haphazardly tossed the blanket across his mom's husband before rushing out.

He didn't intend to tell—as even he had the nastiest feeling Will had done *something* wrong—but he knew this would not evade his mom for long (he'd bet on her finding out before lunch.)

interlude

Chapter Notes

> cannot believe how long i've wrestled with this chapter. cannot believe it's actually here and i'm actually happy with it—not least thanks to the wonderful poljupci for holding my hand throughout!
>
> so yeah. the extremely long awaited molly pov. buckle in i guess!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

INTERLUDE

An air of detachment hung around the reporter that delivered the chilling news in a bored drone. Despite the dispassionate delivery, Molly stared ahead at the TV intently—a murder, in the heart of DC. Behind the woman, clips of the grim scenes of flashing police lights and cordoned-off streets acted as the most macabre backdrop.

At one point or another, the closeup of the reporter's face gave way for the actual footage—zoom-ins on the crime scene, on the police vehicles, on the disturbed passers-by, on the chief of police, on the group of feds gathered around a stocky, serious-looking man mid-screaming match (what looked to be one, anyway—one could only assume, given the lack of sound. The angry gestures and hostile body language revealed enough) with a red-haired woman. Maybe a journalist, maybe only somebody too curious for her own good. (Maybe both.)

Molly shut the TV off. She didn't think she was a queasy woman—not by a long shot—and yet something about the broadcast, this particular broadcast, left an alarmingly bad taste in her mouth; like the aftertaste of drinking too strong a tea, the bitterness sticking at the back of her throat.

She started at herself, at her dark reflection in the turned-off TV. She observed her own form, curled up on the couch (perpendicular to the television), leaned against one of the armrests with legs drawn up to her chin. She was uncomfortable—her back was *screaming* at her, and she knew very well she'd feel the consequences of this soon enough.

It wasn't as though there was no seating space in the room. There were two armchairs, besides, with a better view of the screen. One Will's. One someone else's.

If a stranger had inquired, she surely would've sound slightly… well, *weird*. Whose armchair would it be, if not her own? (Or their own—but it wasn't *their own* either.) In their own house, paid with their own money, assembled by themselves—and yet.

And yet, she could not dissuade herself from this notion that it did not belong to either of them. She could recall the shopping trip, after having walked in on Will attempting to mend the old, destroyed one with regular needle and thread (he couldn't.) (Something else Will also *couldn't* do was offer anything approaching an explanation—it didn't even have to be a decent one, it didn't even need to make sense, Molly had only desperately needed *an* explanation, she had needed him to placate her—and yet, he could not muster up anything.)

So, they'd gone shopping together a new one, that day.

Molly still didn't think they'd needed to, per se. A couch and an armchair seemed plenty for a household consisting of three members, whose only visitors ever were Will's coworkers and, once in a blue moon, Molly's mom.

But Will had been insistent. An armchair was *needed.* He would not say why.

If one thing had ever been true and unchanging, it is that Molly knew Will. Walking and weaving through the aisles bordered by furniture, she had been certain—so much so she could've had betted on it—that she knew what Will would've chosen. Something simple, something closely resembling the one they'd had so far—moderately-sized, dark brown leather, round edges. In fact, one just like it—less tattered and *newer*, obviously—had greeted them almost immediately upon their walking into the armchair section.

She'd known she could've given her input, given her residence in the house, given it was a shared space—but she hadn't cared overmuch, and mostly she hadn't wanted to alter Will's surroundings to his dislike.

Will, the hater of shopping and the disliker of all public spaces, had spun around that store for a good half hour, perhaps longer. He'd run his hands over the backs of most armchairs displayed, he'd looked closely at each one that had caught his eye—until, inevitably, he'd decide that it did not meet his demands.

What the demands were—Molly hadn't known. She hadn't cared to ask—the whole ordeal had been confusing enough.

Now, Molly stared at the piece of furniture in place of the old one, and could not quite grasp it. It wasn't a monstrosity. It wasn't offensive to the eye (even if it mildly crashed with the rustic sort of decor—and in calling it rustic, Molly avoided harsher words.) She might've even chosen it herself.

And yet it had been *Will's* pick.

A sleek, brand new black leather armchair looked back at her. It exuded elegance, she thought, elegance and a tasteful sort of opulence (so unlike… anything else Will chose to surround himself with.) Clean lines. Squared-off edges. Supple leather shimmering in the light.

It might be comfortable—Molly wouldn't have any idea. She was sure Will wouldn't have the first idea either, if she asked.

The fact was: nobody ever sat in the armchair.

It has been a few months now. Molly has been regularly dusting it, covering it in blankets, *cluttering* it, really, despising the disuse, the waste of money. It was shocking that Will did not despise this also.

(And every morning, without fail, she would find the blankets put away, the throw pillows and such removed—yet no trace of the piece ever having been sat on. And she would *know*—one time, after having made sure she was well and truly alone in the house, she'd knelt down before it and looked for any wrinkles in the leather, any dent in the seating area, any curly strands of hair clinging to its back. Yet plainly, there had been nothing. There never was anything.)

Will remained a mystery to her, in some respects. She feared she would never really crack him. Very often, she found herself debating whether she should even feel as though it was something she wished to do. She'd married him knowing he came with baggage aplenty—so did she, and this, in part, seemed to make them a decent match. (She would not call it a *perfect* match.) And baggage though they had, neither of them was a particularly nosy person. Perhaps, on Will's end, it was something closer to disinterest—which she hadn't known then, not really, or perhaps she merely hadn't wanted to see it.

Molly was home alone, save for the dogs, which was a rare luxury. It made her feel a little less like an intruder, somebody imposing themselves upon someone else's home; whether it was her husband's disposition or the *his-ness* of this house, she couldn't tell you—but, whichever it was, the fact remained that she could breathe a little easier when he wasn't around. What with Wally being at school for the moment, she could also simply *relax.*

-

Molly didn't relax.

Wally had arrived from school a little earlier than anticipated—rather than having taken the bus, the parents of a friend of his had given him a lift. Which was awful nice of them. Her son's early arrival wasn't the issue in itself (perish the thought), yet she grew… concerned, she supposed, upon having asked about his day.

Sitting at the table and dangling his feet beneath the chair, mouth full of pasta, Wally relayed: "I spoke to a nice lady. And her friend, I guess."

Molly frowned, though schooled her expression fairly quickly. Despite the overwhelming motherly dread coursing through her body, she resumed: "Really? What lady?"

"Dunno," he shrugged carelessly, understandably blissfully unaware of the gravity of the situation, "She didn't say."

“And her friend?”

“Didn’t say, either.”

“Well, what did they look like?” Molly pressed. Her head was spinning—possible and impossible scenarios flittering in and out. The name Jack Crawford sprang out at her from the whirlwind. She pushed it away.

“The lady had red hair. Long. Curly.”

Molly swallowed bile, her throat sandpaper. *I was with Katie. I stayed over at Katie’s.* Her grip on the coffee mug in her hands tightened. Had it been glass instead of ceramic, it might’ve shattered. *Katie. From work.* She brought the mug up to her lips, took a drink from it; vying for time, arranging her thoughts as best she could. “And her friend?”

Wally giggled. Molly was utterly perplexed, herself being unable to see a single funny angle to this—though her son elaborated: “Had tattoos. All over his arms! You wouldn’t have liked it, ma, I just know it!”

She offered a weak, fleeting smile—unable to manage anything beyond it. She felt hollowed out. “Is that so? Tell me what you had talked about, yeah?”

“Oh,” Wally’s little brows furrowed, a *V* forming between them as he suddenly paid much attention to his plate. She didn’t miss the little guilty bite of his lip, the way he pushed pasta around. “Will, mostly.”

Silence.

“W-Will?” she stuttered out.

“Yes, but-”

Molly… couldn’t.

The mug was gently placed on the counter. Her ears buzzed, rendering her oblivious to the clink of ceramic meeting the surface. The sound of her own footfalls didn’t reach her ears, as if she were a ghostly presence. She felt like one, at least.

Wally's voice came from the kitchen, though his words were muffled and indecipherable. Or maybe they weren’t. She couldn’t say. Anything at all was hard to make out for the moment.

In the end, she found herself in the bathroom adjoined to their bedroom. She didn’t cry, but it was a close call.

Will was home late. Late, but not *terribly* late. Molly has had a few precious hours to pull herself together.

It was nothing she hadn't already suspected. Nothing that hadn't already crossed her mind a million times. Nothing that she hadn't already grappled with.

Only, that had been months ago. *Months.*

And Will—

God, he had changed, since then. She had thought…

God. Naïve, naïve, *naïve.*

She wanted to be so angry with him. She hadn't drafted the scathing speech of a woman scorned, but was ready to unleash upon him something to the effect. She wouldn't hold back any longer.

Her unfaithful husband walked through the door. Her unfaithful husband kicked off his shoes, took off his jacket. Her unfaithful husband came into the kitchen. Her unfaithful husband's hands landed on her hips.

Her unfaithful husband kissed her.

Molly forgot her anger.

Her husband took her to bed.

-

Will was far more eager to take her to bed these days.

She might've found herself perplexed by this change if she hadn't… if it weren't for… *Well.* Molly wasn't so much a simpleton that she couldn't make the connection between the usual lack of affection in their day-to-day life (that had, if anything, become even more pronounced, which was quite telling in itself) and his being almost a different man (the man she had thought she had married), under the cover of night and bedsheets.

Attentive.

Selfless, if you got her meaning.

And, sure, Will exhibited certain… quirks, so to say, which Molly couldn't really wrap her head around. The way he touched her now was so unlike the way he'd ever touched her before.

His hands slid up her torso, yet evaded her breasts.

His hair tickled her collarbones when he bent down to kiss the empty spot between them.

His mouth often hovered over her heart. It did so now, too.

Her shoulders were a testament to his frequent ministrations—owing to the fact it had been agreed upon marking visible places wouldn't do. On account of Molly's work, mostly. And friends. And the precious few members of her family she keeps in contact with. It had been easy enough to tell a white lie or two about that old bite—much more than that, she didn't think she'd get away with.

This didn't mean she missed the way Will stared at it. Often. There was hardly anything to see at present—the wound not having been that deep. A smattering of scar tissue, mostly white with the occasional pale pink straggler. Perhaps in another month, even that would fade away. Nevertheless, this didn't diminish her husband's… fascination with it (she wouldn't use the harsher word.) His eyes frequently drifted to it during the day, and at night, his lips wandered *woundward*, too. He kissed it more fervently than he kissed her lips.

Speaking of kissing—that had changed, too. It seemed as though he couldn't bear to keep their mouths apart, so much so that Molly had found she couldn't get a word in edgewise at the best of times.

She whimpered against his lips, and as ever, he greedily inhaled each and every little noise. *Greedily.* Right. A good summary of the general theme. Will was greedy in the way he touched her, in the way he took her. She might've confused it with passion—if she mightn't've *known* her husband. More than a mere consummation of their marriage, this was… something else. Guilt?

Her legs tightened around him, nails dug into the meat of his back.

Close.

He was, too. She could tell, from the stuttering of his hips, from the tautness of his stomach, from the irregularity of his breaths—

Chapter End Notes

small note: the dash ("—") and the incomplete last sentence are purposeful!

copper

Chapter Notes

wowie a few scenes of blissful domesticity and then right back into the thick of the Plot (tm)

ACT II

Maybe I am too red for all the slaughter carried within me, bastard child of water, lake swelled with rotting fish. What are you searching for when you drag me from you?
(Torrin A. Greathouse, from "*Phlebotomy, as Told by the Blood"*)

-

—his hips stuttered in that tell-tale way of a nearing release; Will felt *wild*—long having abandoned any residual inhibitions and much too lost to his own pleasure to set himself to rights. It was not lost on him, either, that he must've looked it, too; no doubt flushed in the face, skin glistening with sweat, hair a tangled mess (bar those parts he felt plastered to his forehead and the back of his neck.)

Hannibal did not retain his usual level of composure, either.

Will liked him like that.

Clawing at the bedsheets, at Will, at anything he could conceivably get his hands on. Strong legs pressed Will flush with his body, pressed Will *into* his body.

Will was drunk with it.

And after, Will let Hannibal brush those soaked strands off his face, tuck them behind his ears. He let Hannibal do a great many things, whilst he himself kept busy by tracing the vertical scar stretching across the expanse of his chest.

It had scarred the very next day, after that particularly bloody night. It had been a thick, angry red line for a time—before it turned pale, nearly the color of Hannibal's skin. That healing timeline was totally fucked on several fronts—none of that should have occurred as quickly as it had—but Will hadn't been eager to question it too much nonetheless. What did it matter?

Hannibal's fingers gradually lost their roughness, his body gradually lost its imposing quality, his hair darkened and spilled down his shoulders in a gentle cascade. *Her* shoulders. The face

looking down at him was now Molly's.

A soft sigh escaped Will's mouth. Molly would mistake it for exhaustion. It was merely disappointment—always present, once reality would set in (and that, in itself, was a rarer and rarer occurrence.) It stung far more than a knife in the gut. (His fingers traced over the faded smile in his abdomen lovingly.)

Molly settled on her side of the bed, hand reaching for the remote. Will climbed out, hand reaching for the pack of lights on his nightstand. The window had become something of a permanent post ever since he'd taken up the habit of smoking after sex.

Both of his partners were rather disapproving of that bad habit—and Will, being a considerate husband and a mindful lover, carefully chose the moments to indulge. This was perfect.

Molly would doze off with the soft sounds of a late-night drama in lieu of a lullaby. Hannibal would not appear for another little while.

-

His hands were clutching the coffee mug with desperation only known to men who day in and day out had to wake at absolutely criminally early hours for work. They were trembling, too, though so was the rest of his body—autumn chill, thankfully, and nothing more.

(Hopefully.)

Glancing above the rim of the mug, Will's eyes landed on the clock—the green digits blinking at him from their position on the oven. Five-thirty in the morning. (He had never adjusted it for the daylight savings after all, which meant that—considering the time of year—it was once again accurately telling the time.)

Having drained the coffee, he strolled into the living room. Hannibal was there already, sitting cross-legged in his armchair. Will acknowledged him with a small nod, too tired for words.

The TV was on at a low volume, currently regaling them both with reruns of some ancient sitcom. Will barely knew the characters' names, let alone the plot, despite having watched several episodes—owing to the fact he could hardly retain anything at this hour. The show was mostly there to keep him attentive and awake enough before duty called and he was forced to depart to Maritime Masters.

Though more than the show, Will was kept entertained by Hannibal's presumed suffering. It had never been a topic of conversation (how could it have? Ought he have asked about Hannibal's cinematographic preferences with a maimed body beneath them, or perhaps in the middle of a conversation dissecting Will's psyche? "Hey, doc, I know you just served me with a detailed analysis of pretty much everything inherently and irreparably wrong with my brain, but I've been wondering—are you more of a Scorsese or a Kubrick sort of guy?"), but Will fancied the thought Hannibal had never deigned to spare a minute on anything short of a

1970-something film-noir classic exploring the dark underbelly of the world's most authoritarian governments from the perspective of an orphaned immigrant. (Or something.)

And maybe opera documentaries.

Hannibal, much to Will's annoyance however, was—as ever—impassive. His face did not betray a single emotion in response to the (*surely)* grating sound of densely-packed laugh-tracks and the increasingly unfunny and painfully unoriginal jokes.

His only real tell was the subtle twitch of a muscle beneath his eye.

It was all terribly unsatisfying.

(And lest we forget, Will *too* was forced to sit through the show—without so much as a decent payoff for his own suffering.)

"Heavens know I will never become entirely familiar with every last vestige of your unique mind, so I must ask you this, Will—what do you gain from this?"

Will absentmindedly toyed with his phone, turning the shut-off device this way and that in his hands, "I'm afraid I don't understand your meaning, Dr Lecter."

"Such a bald-faced lie is rather unbecoming," Hannibal did not roll his eyes—the action being beneath him and all that junk—but Will rather thought he fantasized about doing it in that moment.

"If the program isn't to your liking, please—I invite you to change it," Will inclined his head at the remote, inconspicuously laid on the coffee table and well within Hannibal's reach.

Hannibal glanced at the small device, and then leveled Will with an absolutely scathing look.

-

Hannibal did not follow Will to work.

Which was for the best, really. Will was still condemned to using public transport, which gave even *him* hives (he would never get used to the morning rush.) Hannibal and a bus full of tired, overworked, and not always so hygienic people seemed like the opposite of a good idea. *Not* that Will cared about Hannibal's comfort or lack thereof—truly. He was only saving himself the headache.

Eamonn was still worried about him.

It was unfounded. Really.

He'd been to Will's house more than a couple times in the last few months—claiming to have *been in the area.* Yeah, right. Whatever—Will didn't mind. He'd long learned that one could never have *too many* people who cared. Eamonn was the easiest to appease out of those—one decent talk over a coffee or beer (usually beer) got him out of Will's hair for a decently long

while (until the next inevitable check-up.) Will didn't begrudge him one bit, anyway—he, too, knew what it was like to be concerned over the strays one picked up off the street.

Still—the man wore his emotions on his sleeve and in his eyes. Will knew the way he was regarded by the other man, knew what that clouded-over, pitying sort of look meant. Hannibal knew, too—he delighted in pointing it out.

Katie…

Well.

He'd warned her.

He didn't feel like a particularly good person for this—in fact, even in his head he sounded like a raging asshole. *He'd warned her*—what the fuck kind of a poor excuse was that? Yet it was the only one he had.

She still shot lingering, longing looks at him from the other side of the workshop. She still, he was sure, thought there was a way to get back into his good graces.

The sad fact was that she'd never been *in his good graces* to begin with—there was nothing to return to. Their friendship had been a good distraction when Will needed to be distracted. Her services were simply no longer needed or wanted.

Oh, how he wished there was a socially acceptable way of conveying that.

"That is a touch hypocritical, is it not?" Hannibal mused, mindlessly ruminating through Will's toolbox while Will worked. (Will *hoped* it was mindless rumination—for all he knew, Hannibal could've instead preoccupied himself with categorizing his finds according to their effectiveness if employed as a murder weapon, or even how efficiently he could maim with a wrench versus a screwdriver.)

Will carefully tightened a cotter pin (however the owner of this boat avoided their propeller coming loose while underway, he had no idea. The luck some of these people had…) "I don't see how," he replied, having become much too accustomed to the way Hannibal shamelessly steered thoughts right out of Will's head into real-life conversation. (It used to freak him out—it really did; for many weeks, he could not shake the discomfort and unease which came with the knowledge *Hannibal Lecter* (and it didn't matter, not really, that it wasn't *really* him—) had access to *all* of his thoughts and feelings and fears. However, by now… well, what's he to do about it?)

"You do not?" Hannibal quirked an eyebrow. (Will couldn't see him—not with the faulty propeller hogging all of his attention—but he *knew.*) "You are not exactly the picture-perfect embodiment of following social conventions, Will—nor are you overly concerned with repaying kindness. One might argue it would, in fact, be much more merciful to push her sufficiently away with direct words (even uncouth ones), than stringing her along like a puppet."

Will grit his teeth. *There it was.* The idea of pleasant time in the company of Hannibal Lecter was the biggest delusion of them all (—and it had strong competition.)

“I’m not- that’s not what’s happening.” He hammered down a nail with a touch too much force than strictly necessary. “Her cluelessness isn’t on me.”

“You are aware of her cluelessness, yet persist in enabling it. Curious.”

Will turned his head to shoot him a dirty look. “It’s not curious. I’m preoccupied—it’s not exactly the focal point of my attention.”

“Preoccupied, yes—is that why you have been laboring over that very much fixed propeller for the last half of the hour?” Hannibal was perfectly content in engaging Will in a stare-off —which Will was stupid enough to initiate *every time*. He should have learned by now which one of them could physically go without blinking. (Definitely not him.) “Which, as well, I am certain has little to do with the small fact Miss Adler is occupying the break room? You are terribly transparent, Will.”

“*Transparent*—?” The nerve of him—he was in Will’s *head.* Will composed himself, anyway, before speaking, “You know as well as I do that it’d do more harm than good. She won’t desist, and I refuse to… well.”

“Give her the time of day?” Hannibal supplied, unhelpfully.

Will threw the hammer at him. Hannibal dissipated before it found its target.

-

That evening, the three of them found themselves sharing a comfortable, quiet moment in front of the television. The scene painted a captivating, albeit peculiar, picture—Molly, curled up on the couch, engrossed in a book; Will, idly browsing his phone, occasionally punctuating the silence with a sip of whiskey (he was yet to wean himself off it, despite not having gone out in a long while); Hannibal, quietly seated with eyes half-lidded, more likely than not wandering the vast corridors of his mind-palace.

It was a strange sight altogether.

However, Will had grown used to it. In a weird, fucked-up sort of way.

“Will?” Molly’s voice came from the couch. He looked at her. “Could I use your phone for a quick second, please? I need to make a call.”

Will held it out without a thought, watching Molly disappear into the kitchen with it.

“It is more than likely she is poking around in there—leaving no stone unturned, shall we say,” Hannibal stated, as soon as Molly was out of sight.

“Yes,” Will simply nodded.

“Does the invasion of privacy not bother you?” Hannibal tilted his head, “And—more than that—the deception? You did not much appreciate my own, lest we forget.”

“No, not really,” he offered a small shrug, depleting the rest of the whiskey, “It’s her due diligence.”

Hannibal let out a sort of hum, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “You are aware she suspects an affair, yet have never quelled her fears?”

Will’s mouth stretched into a crooked sort of smile. There was no mirth to it—as Will was terribly ambivalent about the whole thing. “Molly would not believe a word out my mouth about it—and, besides, the outright lying would be…” Will waved a hand through the air, searching for a word, “distasteful.”

“Omission is more your speed, is it?”

“Perhaps,” he huffed softly.

Hannibal seemed to ponder for a long moment. “Lying, you said.”

“Lying.”

“I wonder—would the denial of an affair with Katie be a lie? You are, after all, not engaged in one. To my knowledge,” he cocked a brow, “Which is, of course, absolute.”

“I could deny an affair with Katie, yes,” Will acknowledge with a small nod, “I could not deny *an affair.*” He looked significantly at Hannibal.

Hannibal’s eyes twinkled. “I see.”

-

All in all, they had fallen into something of a routine. In a manner of speaking.

It was all terribly normal. All terribly… ordinary. Unexceptional.

So much so, in fact, that Will might’ve become suspicious of it all. It was *his life,* after all—he’d become more than used to the fact that *normal, ordinary, unexceptional* would not exactly be his top picks if he were asked to describe it in three words. (Why three? Well, they always stop at three, don’t they?)

Thus, it must follow that things could not remain *normal, ordinary, unexceptional* for much longer—they never did.

Walter had virtually taken over what could generously be called *the office*. (In reality, it was a cramped room off the kitchen containing a single bookshelf, some ancient boxes full of even more ancient files, a scruffy desk and a rickety desk chair that definitely could do with being replaced—oh, and a window.) Nevertheless, he'd claimed it for himself for most of the afternoon after returning from school. Which was… well, fine. It meant the kid was mostly

out of the way, which was more than anyone could ask for. A touch out of the ordinary, perhaps, but—he was growing up. Wasn't it about time Walter entered some phase or other?

Will, himself, had been hard at work preparing dinner by the time Walter trotted out, his still-shrill voice of a prepubescent ten-year-old traveling through the house as he called out for *Winston, Max, Buster*—and so on, 'till he caught them all. Like a real-life Pokémon situation, really.

The backdoor closed with a muffled thud, plunging the house into silence. Will could hardly ignore the twinge of annoyance that clambered up his spine when he noticed a faint, pallid blue glow seeping out from beneath the office door in the corner of his eye.

He set down the knife he'd been holding, just there beside the chunk of meat on the cutting board, and ventured into the office himself (again—hardly an office, et cetera, et cetera…) He'd intended only to shut down the computer (which was not a difficult thing to do, and if the kid was capable enough to mess around on the device all day, he *should*—by God—know to *turn it off*.)

Instead, Will found himself thrown off balance by the all-too-familiar tabloid blinking back at him.

His frown deepened as he approached the chair, moving slowly like a cat poised to strike. Slowly as if the computer might strike him back. Slowly as if he's seen a ghost. Slowly like he really might have.

He slid into the chair, hands hovering uncertainly over the keyboard and mouse. A part of him itched to bring the cursor to the X button, close the site and pretend never to have seen it—not *now* that his life was becoming *normal, ordinary, unexceptional.* A marginally bigger part of him was… not *nosy,* but mostly wary in healthy doses. Honestly, a model parent right there—he *ought* to be concerned; this was no content a ten-year-old should see.

The parental concern won in the end. He let himself absorb it all.

The article read as follows:

> November 07, 2016
>
> *The Nation's Number 1 Crime News Periodical*
> **TATTLE CRIME**
>
> **EXCLUSIVE: A new serial on the rise? Where is Will Graham?!**
> *By Freddie Lounds*
>
> IN THE WORLD of criminal profiling, one name stands out above all others—Will Graham—who, as we well know, honed his skills by working as a profiler for the FBI, where he developed a reputation for his uncanny ability to understand the motivations and thought processes of even the most deranged criminals. One of the most famous cases associated with Graham is the pursuit of the infamous serial killer, Hannibal Lecter. Their psychological cat-and-mouse game became the stuff of legend, and it

pushed Graham to the brink of sanity—one might assume, and it might be a correct assumption, as Graham has entirely disassociated himself from the FBI the second the Mad Doctor was put safely behind bars: abandoning his position as a *special* agent on the field as well as his teaching post at Quantico. Has Graham decided to follow the footsteps of his father, relinquishing all comforts of civilization in an attempt to distance himself from the mess he'd left behind in the tri-state area? Has Graham left the country and migrated to Europe (how alike Lecter!) in an attempt to start anew? As it stands, we have not seen nor heard a peep from FBI's (former?) most prized possession.

Until today!

Despite Graham's persistent and rather successful attempts to remain elusive and virtually erase himself off of everyone's radar, it appears as though he did not account for one small thing: his step-son.

The boy, 10, henceforth known as 'WG', reveals the American dream his step-father is living: "He married my mom when I was almost nine years old. We moved into his house in Wolf Trap, have been living there ever since." Who would have thought!? Readers, it is redundant to say that I was most shocked to learn that Graham was so quick to leap into another's bed after that *messy* divorce from the dastardliest serial killer of our time. Should we call it love at first sight, or a rebound? After being asked about his step-father's employment status, WG reveals: "He fixes boats and stuff, 'far as I know. Mom says he works very long hours… probably true, as he's out of the house a lot." This, WG follows up with: "He's an alright guy, though. We went out for ice cream a couple times." Wow, *a couple times*? Will they be handing out Father of the Year awards anytime soon?

While Graham is—blissfully unaware—spending his time *fixing boats and stuff* and taking his not-quite-progeny out for frozen treats, our newest killer remains at large. Perhaps, on reflection, it might be for the best—Graham hardly needs another schoolboy crush to run off into the sunset with (hardly anything could contest with the inherent romance of Florence, but I hear Paris is lovely at this time of year.)

On another hand, our favorite FBI director, Crawford, remains much more tight-lipped when prodded about the profiler-half of the Murder Husbands' whereabouts—even more so in wake of what appears to be another serial on the rise, and the FBI's typical cluelessness about it. The most recent victims, the Jacobi family, seemed to all have been wiped out in a single night by the very same killer the public has dubbed The Tooth Fairy, who has been playing the feds for fools for some weeks now.

Several questions arise in light of these troubling events: is Graham going to sit by and watch as these horrors unravel before his eyes? Will Crawford drag Graham out of his early retirement and put him back on the field? Will the FBI manage to put a stop to these murders, or will the killer once again need to surrender on their own volition due to some serious ineptitude on the agents' part?

Dear readers, I do not as yet have the answers to these questions, yet I will relentlessly pursue them until I may provide them to you.

Familiar anger surged through him, made him clench his fists. The illusion shattered, just like that. All the old demons of the past came forth from deep, dark places they'd been buried. For a time, Will heard nothing. Nothing, save for a ringing in his ears which brought on a terrible, sudden throbbing in his head. He covered his eyes, expecting a pair of two warm hands on his shoulders—but no touch came.

Where was Hannibal?

No matter.

He wasn't sure, not entirely, how long he'd sat there. Just there in the chair, blearily looking at the screen 'till he willed his hand to grab the mouse and exit the website. How he'd managed to unpeel himself from the leather and get up to his wobbly feet, he wasn't so sure.

Will had the distinct feeling something had… *cracked.*

He realized, at some point, that Walter must have returned in the time he'd spent blanking out in front of the computer. He could hear him moving about upstairs—however, just then, Winston decided it was an opportune moment to track down Will within the house. With a graceful gait, he made his way over to Will and affectionately pressed his wet nose against the crisp fabric of Will's *clean* trousers.

And it hit him, suddenly, after that very thought sped through his head—when had he *ever* cared about the dogs dirtying his clothing? When had he started even thinking about that sort of thing? He had spent years, for Chrissakes, all but sleeping with the pack of them: a single mattress on the floor of his living room, one with the rest of the dog beds. What had changed? When had *he* changed?

His knees hit the floor, which he only became aware of due to the pain shooting up his legs—and, well, Winston's furry face having suddenly become level with his. Will set his hands upon Winston's flanks, letting them move in a rhythmic, soothing motion as they glided through the dog's soft, silken coat. Up his neck and to his face, his thumbs gently brushing the fur beneath those big, brown eyes.

Walter must have come downstairs. Will was not paying mind to much at all; merely, the sudden sound of a voice behind him jolted him into awareness.

It could not be Molly, as she was not at home.

It could not be Hannibal, as he would've touched him.

So, the process of elimination and all that—Walter.

Though Winston had been of use in the moment, the sight of the child as Will stood up and turned around to face him brought on all those emotions that the dog had temporarily quelled. The anger, the disbelief, the inexplicable sensation of losing the ground beneath his feet, of falling, *falling.*

He swallowed, licked his lips. Shoved his balled-up fists into the front pockets of his trousers.

Walter stood rock-still, his face caught in an apparently fierce battle between confusion and fear, each emotion etched distinctly upon his young features. Will hadn't the presence of mind to reel himself in, despite this.

"You've spoken to a reporter about me. Why?"

The house around them had fallen into an utter silence. Will's voice sliced through it like a knife, words resonating louder in the stillness. Gradually, the edges of his vision blurred, leaving him with a singular, unwavering focus on the boy standing before him.

He had no intention to skirt around the issue; in fact, he found himself rather incapable of doing so.

They seemed to have found themselves in a stalemate—or what felt like one, Walter refraining from uttering a word for what felt like an eternity. Just as Will considered repeating himself, the boy finally broke the delicate tension.

"She'd asked questions," he said, as if that was a good enough reason.

He's ten, he's ten, echoed somewhere in the back of his mind. *He's- no.* He should know better. He *must* know better.

"You-" Will began, though his own sharp intake of breath cut him off. (*He's ten, he's ten, he's ten.*) "What were you thinking?" He managed, a whisper. (*He's ten, he's ten—*) Walter's eyes reflected the lightbulb burning above them, glassy. (*He's ten.*) "How could you have- *what were you thinking?*"

"Nothing, I'm- I'm sorry, Will. Honest." Walter clutched the hem of his shirt tightly, head bowed, small shoulders hunched (though he did not step back.) "I didn't think… - she seemed *nice*-"

"Freddie Louds? *Nice?*" He could hardly help the incredulity in his voice, the shocked sort of laugher which escaped him—the sort that had, historically, unsettled many; too sharp, too shrill, too inappropriate for comfort. (*He's ten.*) Will, in that moment, did not account for the fact that Walter would not know of Freddie Lounds. That in his little mind, the world was a good place and the people inhabiting it had pure intentions. It didn't matter. Not just then. "You cannot be that naïve." (*He's ten, he's ten—*)

"I didn't *know*-"

Will took a step forward. A menacing figure in the darkened hallway, the faint light behind him now shrouding him further in shadows. He knelt before the boy, eyes darting about. *Unstable, again,* rattled through his head. *He's ten. Unstable, again. He's ten.* "That was… to do that, Walter- that is *rude.* It is a very *rude* thing to do, okay?" He stood back up. "You'd do well to remember that."

And then, he was… gone.

His legs carried him out of the house, into the night.

A key jingled in the pocket of his shirt.

He took Molly's car.

He drove away.

And he drove, for a while.

Hannibal filled the empty passenger's seat. He did not say much—but he was there.

Will snuck glances at the doctor.

He was there, and that was good enough.

tawny

Chapter Notes

> an update in less than a week who has seen this coming???
>
> i thought it was extremely necessary to put out another very fast because imho the last two chapters have only been mildly okay and i craved the serotonin of a well-written chapter ASAP. and here it is omg. you can really tell i gain my footing somewhere after the first scene aaaa. anyway i hope im not the only one really pleased w this

The first light of dawn crept over the horizon, though the forest beneath it was still shrouded in a deep darkness. The air, crisp and cool, was thick with the scent of damp moss and fallen leaves. There were no birds to chipper and tweet at this time of year, not really, though the gentle murmur of a nearby stream filled the forest with sound nonetheless.

Will watched the sky begin to change—darker hues giving way to softer blues, stars fading out of sight. A golden-yellow light filtered through the thick canopies above, warming his face that had become numb with cold. Sunlight at this time of year was symbolic at best, deceptively cool and mostly—in a manner of speaking—for show: but, still, it was pleasant in the moment. With not another source of warmth, Will would take what he could get.

He stood leaned against the flank of the car, and in turning his head ever so slightly (a motion which felt as though it should produce the sort of creaking of rusty hinges), he saw his face in the righthand door mirror. The color blue permeated his features—blue in the bags beneath his eyes, blue on his frozen lips, blue in the way the night chill had sucked all the color out of his face.

In turning his head the other way, he saw Hannibal. Hannibal, who, contrasting Will, was the very picture of life—with a healthy pink tinge to his skin, with gently rosy cheeks (which Will privately thought were incredibly endearing—but that was neither here nor there.) He was utterly unaffected by the November temperatures—but, why would he be? Will emitted a humorless sort of chuckle; he oughtn't be surprised that, between the two of them, he's always been the one less inclined to cling to life. He finally looked it.

"Some spiritual traditions incorporate sleep deprivation as a means to induce altered states of consciousness or enhance spiritual experiences," Hannibal began, unprovoked, and the sound of his voice cutting through the relative stillness so suddenly startled Will into awareness, "Was this the purpose of your somewhat questionable choice to remain awake throughout the night, or is something else afoot?"

Blinking rapidly to will his vision back into focus, Will looked around the forest, taking in the sights while wrapping his sleep-deprivation-addled brain around the convoluted question:

“No. Yes. Maybe. I’m not sure,” he shrugged, “I guess I just couldn’t really sleep.”

“I take it Miss Lounds might take credit for that?” Hannibal glanced at him.

Will’s lower lip curled derisively. “She might.”

A stretch of silence.

Will continued: “We’ve already had this conversation. I needed to… I wanted to leave it all behind. Why is it so *hard?* You’d made it look so… *easy*—with an arguably worse past to run from. Nobody could find you—”

“You found me.”

Will fixed him with a careful look. “—unless you wanted to be found. *I* have no such aspirations, and yet…” he trailed off.

Hannibal folded his arms over his chest. “Lest you forget—you hardly made it difficult. You cut ties with the FBI, yes. You alienated your friends and coworkers, yes. You’d stopped frequenting places you’d gone before, yes—but you remained in Wolf Trap, under the same name and address. Disappearing from the public eye is a far cry from uprooting one’s entire life. You must have expected different results.” After a moment, Hannibal added, “However, I think you are well aware of that. I would hate being presumptuous—” (a snort from Will) “—but it all points to one conclusion.”

“Which is?”

Hannibal looked at him significantly, eyes searching. “A part of you must have, even then, wished to eventually be dragged out of your *hidey-hole.*”

Will could not really make facial expressions as yet, owing to the fact he could still hardly feel (let alone move) any body part directly exposed to the air. However, he attempted to force an affronted sort of look. “You’re wrong.”

“Am I? I’m you.”

“*That* line had gotten old the last thirty-seven times you’ve said it.”

“Curious—I would say that *that* particular deflection is somewhat grating on the ears by now.”

“It’s irrelevant, anyway,” Will sniffed, “whether I’d wanted it or not. I don’t want it *now.*”

“An exercise in honesty towards oneself,” Hannibal hummed.

Will ignored him.

He chose to focus on prettier things instead.

Trees, as far and wide as one could see—but if one looked just closely enough, if one followed a path weaving ‘round the thick trunks, one would spot the glistening stream beyond. Previously hidden in shadow, now its waters shimmered with the colors of sunrise.

“We’re at the tail end of bass season,” Will murmured, to nobody in particular, eyes on the moving waters, “I could’ve…” He sounded wistful.

“You have given up the hobby, have you not?”

Will cast a quick look down at his shoes before looking ahead once more. “Only out of necessity. I had… I had made my final big catch. It wouldn’t have done, not to hang up my fishing gear.”

“And what a catch it had been—the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal sounded wistful himself—though, unlike Will, he spoke almost fondly of the once-upon-a-time. “It seems that I have retired you in more ways than one.”

“It seems so,” Will agreed, “I’m not sure… well. I never really caught you, did I? You surrendered. It might be disingenuous to claim otherwise.”

“On the contrary, I would hesitate to put it any other way, Will,” he could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, “I had hooked myself onto one of your masterfully crafted lures a very long time ago—only, you had not started reeling until much later.”

The strangest sort of ache lanced through him—and with it, an inexorable need to reach out and grab hold of Hannibal. Before he could consider it—consider that he could feel Hannibal’s touch, but not touch in turn (not, unless, his wife… *assisted*)—his hand shot out of its shelter in the pocket of his trousers and landed atop Hannibal’s.

Should’ve landed atop Hannibal’s. *Would’ve,* in a better world

As it was, the only thing Will felt beneath his fingers was the cold metal of the car door.

He didn’t need to look to know that Hannibal was gone.

-

Tucked away on a desolate stretch of highway, a nondescript motel stood as a grim and rather unkind reminder of the ruthlessness of time. A weather-beaten relic of bygone days. *Better* days, some might say and mean it; *better* days, some might say while donning their nostalgia-tinted glasses: memories viewed through a selective lens which tinge them with a rosy hue. The past is reduced to *simpler times*—cherished in retrospect. This was precisely how Will saw the motel as Molly’s car rolled to a stop before it; the neon sign reading *Canyon View* (despite the very apparent lack of any *canyon* nearby to *view*) sputtered erratically, casting eerie shadows across the cracked pavement of the parking lot.

Stepping out of the vehicle and approaching the old building, Will was a lot more charmed than he ought to have been—the paint on the exterior had long since peeled away, leaving the facade a mottled patchwork of faded blues and grays in its wake. His hand grazed the front-

door handle with some reverence, and as he crossed the threshold, he felt uncannily as though he was stepping into a different era. The reception area was dimly lit, and a musty odor was thick in the air. Musty and… *nostalgic*; musty like his childhood, musty like a third week of room-renting, musty like living with nothing but a suitcase to his name, musty like the comforting scent of daddy's presence. Musty and good. Musty and just-what-he-needed. Musty and far-removed-from-the-life-he-knew-now.

Behind the check-in counter (adorned with faux wood paneling, laminate surface chipped and peeling at the edges) sat a woman who, much like *Canyon View,* had not stood the test of time. Perched precariously on her nose was a pair of cat-eye glasses, above the rims of which her little beady eyes zeroed in on Will probably just as soon as he came into focus. She looked plucked straight from the 70's, clad in vibrant floral patterns and ruffles (some might call this a 'uniform' but Will would call it 'a polyester monstrosity.')

As she peered over the counter with an air of authority that only decades of motel management could bestow (wielding a pen like a seasoned swordswoman, stabbing at an ancient-looking desktop with a fierce determination that suggested it had wronged her personally), she spoke five little words into the world: "'Evenin'. How may I help you?"

Her voice was awfully low for a woman, even for her age (come to think of it, what *was* her age? Fifty or seventy, Will couldn't tell you), and it came out scratchy as though it hadn't been used in a long while. For that matter, maybe it truly hadn't been. Will didn't imagine this place had much traffic, and if this woman's warm and approachable demeanor was anything to go by, he wouldn't imagine she had many to speak to. (Was that unnecessarily cunty? Maybe.)

Will cleared his throat unnecessarily, "I'd like to book a double for… make that two nights, please."

She assailed the keyboard once more, then bestowed him with a most resolute nod (so firm a nod that it disturbed the delicate balance of those glasses and tipped them right off her nose—though luckily, they were held up by a string around her neck.) A drawer opened, a bony hand rummaged for a key—and there; slid across the surface of the desk was a small, brass key with a label which read "102." Will took that to mean the second room on the first floor; either way, he did not wait to find out. After slapping a couple of bills on the counter (more than likely too much), he booked it.

The décor of the room 102 was nothing less than a study in vintage kitsch. It was… *charming,* certainly—the faded floral wallpaper clinging to the walls for dear life was an avant-garde choice if Will's ever seen one, complimenting the melancholy beige of the slightly crooked curtains. The carpet covering every last inch of the floor was… a peculiar shade of green, blooming with stains large and small (ones that would given the forensics team a run for their money, Will was certain.) It was all very… *muted mustard meets antique avocado*.

The room was rather bereft of furniture, save for a double-bed (its centerpiece in every way) and a shabby-looking dresser atop which sat a concerningly small yet outdatedly bulky TV, both of which have—as everything here—seen better days. Will certainly did not count himself out of that category, by the way.

Will wasn't surprised when Hannibal made an appearance, strolling out of the bathroom and looking entirely out of place in his three-piece suit.

Will smirked. "You've always had a penchant for dramatic entrances, hm?"

"I would hardly call this dramatic," the man huffed, as though affronted by Will's entirely correct assertion.

"I'll admit, the mental image of you lying in wait among… mismatched tiles, a dripping faucet, and a cracked mirror—guesstimating here, by the way, did I get any of it right?—" Will persisted in smirking, though chose to do this from the comfort (*comfort* here being a relative word, more so a part of a phrase than a truthful descriptor) of the bed, "—is enough to lift my spirits."

"If my perceived misery amuses you so, I am only glad to be of service," Hannibal intoned dryly, though returned in kind with a scathing reply of his own, "I am however glad to inform you that I did not spend any significant length of time in the bathroom; my departure from the very same is merely your mind's way of making sense of my appearance. I condone it—I, too, imagine that seeing me pop into existence apropos of nothing would ruffle your staggeringly delicate feathers."

Will made a face at the comment, though didn't bother attempting to argue his case. Which he *would,* by the way, and he *could,* if he wanted to. Only, he knew he'd be wasting his breath; Hannibal, in that rich-obnoxious-educated-asshole way, always had a rebuttal for any given argument—but, more importantly, he *adored* the sound of his own voice. There would be no winning here, and forfeiting was in every way wiser.

"Why are we here, Will?"

Will winced. Cutting right to the chase, no foreplay.

"You're the doc here, doc," Will evaded expertly, "You tell me."

Hannibal perched himself against the dresser, arms folded over his chest and regaling Will with the kind of look reserved mostly for difficult children. Will truly felt as if he'd presented Hannibal with a subpar report card or a three-day suspension from elementary school.

"You are a virtuoso in the art of avoidance. Once faced with implications that roused in you the feelings of discomfort and unease, your chosen method of dealing with these unsettling thoughts and emotions was to forsake all things that could prompt you to dwell on them—encompassing not only the individuals delivering the information but also the very place where you received it. You compartmentalize your life; you see no intersecting points between the life you lead now, the life you lead some three years ago, the life you lead when your father was still in it, the life you lead when your *mother* was still in it," Hannibal licked his lips, going full steam ahead and showing no signs of pumping the brakes (suppose Will *did* kind of ask for it), "The ground beneath your feet feels shaky, the very foundations of your current life are crumbling—or you, at least, perceive them to be—as two of your lives show signs of meshing together, characters from one encroaching on the other. You are afraid, frustrated—and in an attempt to regain your footing, you have run away. You are

emulating one of the lives which bears no attachment to the other two, a life which is at no risk of featuring skeletons from closets long locked. Motels such as this one permeated your childhood, given your way of life at the time, the décor especially is reminiscent of it. It is nothing to be ashamed of, Will, finding comfort in such things at a time of crisis," Hannibal finished his little soliloquy, arms dropped and fingers interlaced as he leveled Will with a look again. "So, how did I do?"

Will felt uncomfortably dissected. Being psychoanalyzed was still high up on his list of Things He Detested Being Put Through, and that it came from Hannibal was no exception—only, much was different now between the two of them. Thus, instead of tackling the good doctor to the ground, he quelled the burning desire to do so in favor of using his words.

(A pang of regret flittered through him, for never having done the tackling back when Hannibal was a solid mass which occupied physical space—and thus, able to be tackled.)

Hannibal, despite the overwhelmingly long stretch of unbearably awkward silence, did not offer another word. Will knew well enough why; the bastard wanted *him* to feel awkward enough to speak.

And he would—because this was *really* awkward.

Will stepped right into the proverbial bear-trap with full consciousness he was doing so and with full awareness of the fact that a bear-trap was in place—which is something that could be said about a greater part of his interactions with Hannibal in the last years.

He wondered what that said about him.

"Do you get a kick out of this sort of stuff? Don't answer, I know you do."

"You are, once again, deflecting. Does it not get tiring?"

Will threw himself back on the bed in frustration, arms splayed while his legs hung lifelessly over the edge like two strange sticks. "Well, what am I supposed to say about it? You're right, Hannibal, *again.* You read me like a book, *again.* My brain is your playground, *again.* You pick me apart and leave the putting-back-together to me, *again.* Deflection is as good a defense as any. It *deflects,* it's right there in the name."

Hannibal soundlessly approached the bed. Will didn't see him—eyes firmly on the ceiling (dotted with various stains and suffering a severe case of *peeling-off-paint-iolitis*, as disappointing as the rest of the room. In the dead center, an old chandelier—once-gleaming metal of which has faded into a dull, tarnished bronze, and years of dust have settled upon its ornate arms and fixtures.) However, he found he no longer needed to have his eyes on Hannibal to be aware of his position in a given room or his proximity to Will. Considering there was nothing like footsteps or body heat or the subtle sound of breathing to go off of, that was monumentally creepy—but all the same, it was true. Will was simply so uncannily *aware* of him, at all times.

He was, for example, very aware of the way Hannibal hovered over him before settling onto the bed beside him, even when lacking the shifting of the bedframe or the squeaking of the

mattress. He was aware of the way Hannibal's jacket brushed against Will's jeans, even if the fabric wasn't real. (Privately, Will thought it was some sort of a fucked up phantom-limb situation—his mind playing tricks on him, as it was so fond of doing; his eyes saw what they saw, and his brain supplied the sensation of touch, even when there was none.)

Hannibal no longer had that clinical look about him, the look of an assessing doctor. The subtle shift between Doctor Lecter and *Hannibal.* (When had he *stopped* being exclusively Doctor Lecter? Will couldn't pinpoint the moment; suppose it must have happened around the time Will had stopped sensing the fear of God in his heart whenever he'd open his eyes in the middle of the night to find Hannibal loitering about his house like a vaguely menacing ghost. *The Conjuring* called, they want their tropes back.)

Will relented in his own right. His face softened as he took in Hannibal's—the soft, amber light took away a certain sharpness from his features, the [menace?] from his eyes. Shadows caught into each crease and line etched into his skin, and as the ambient light played gracefully across his features, Will felt a suspicious pang in his chest. Something like *longing,* something like another *L* word. He desired above all to lift his hands, frame Hannibal's face, run his thumbs along the soft skin beneath his eyes. The knowledge that he could not, lest the moment went away forever, was brutal.

"You have me in every other way, dear Will," Hannibal murmured, voice soft, because he knew what Will was thinking. Of course.

"I need *this* way," Will whispered back, feeling overwhelmingly as though speaking a decibel too loud would be a mistake. His eyes flickered to Hannibal's lips. He licked his own, even if unable to do anything about it.

Hannibal leaned down, giving Will what he needed in his benevolence. Will, for his part, kept his eyes open like a freak—the only way he could will his brain into feeling something, the barest of grazes, the *phantomest* of sensations. A barely-there-and-mostly-imagined press of lips against his own; Will glutted on it.

A hand touched his face in the same way he'd imagined touching Hannibal. Will almost hated it—hated the way it wasn't really there, the way his mind wouldn't replicate the touch in his nerves to its full extent, hated the way it leeched comfort instead of offering it. It made him want to scream, cry, tear down the walls between the physical realm and wherever Hannibal resided.

He itched to part the lapels of Hannibal's jacket, unravel his tie and unbutton his shirt—see the thin vertical scar over Hannibal's heart, trace and feel it with his fingers, know that *he* was the one to put it there. That *he* had touched Hannibal, once. *Once.* And he'd made it count, alright.

"You bear my mark as I bear yours. Does that please you?" Hannibal tilted his head like a strange bird.

Will looked at him again—all four eyes between them equally full of adoration. "Yes."

A small, pleased smile tugged at Hannibal's lips. In response, a warmth pooled in Will's abdomen, unexpected and sudden—in his mind was a distinct visual of embers springing forth from the strike of flint against steel. One of his hands slid down, index finger traveling along the smooth line of the matching smile carved into his gut. Even beneath the thick fabric of his jumper and coat, he wouldn't miss the spot. After all, it burned like a fresh brand.

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The drive home, after having spent two nights at *Canyon View* (until the very last moment he had to check out, in fact) was… distinctly bitter. Will wished it could've gone on forever—lazing about, watching bad TV, eating junk from the vending machines exclusively, entering mindless philosophical-and-otherwise debates with Hannibal (including but not limited to: an argument about opera, in which Hannibal had expressed a great dislike of a particular opera singer, and Will had claimed to be quite the fan just to incense him (even though he'd hardly had the idea who the woman in question was), and something in the field of epistemology (if memory serves, it had gone something like this:

Hannibal had uttered a complaint (yes, truly) about thirty-two hours into their stay (who would've guessed that the paltry selection of channels on prehistoric television wouldn't be enough to mentally stimulate a being of boundless intelligence such as he?) Will, not a dimwit himself and definitely verging on hopelessly bored, had been willing to indulge him. They'd gone around in circles for a time, until either one of them had said something the other found preposterously untrue—something or other about belief without evidence.

Will, the ex-cop and the ex-special-FBI-agent and the ex-bestie of a forensics team, had firmly taken the side of evidentialism; very simply, rational belief should always be grounded in evidence. Hannibal, on the other hand, had turned out to be more of a pragmatist (though Will had been half-certain he was taking a stance for taking a stance's sake, finding enjoyment in the act of debate without much caring for the topic of it.) He'd suggested that in certain practical situations, it may be rational and justifiable to hold beliefs without strong evidence if those beliefs lead to desirable outcomes or had a pragmatic utility. Will, flabbergasted, had argued that this was epistemically irresponsible, and Hannibal had in turn reminded him that he had been more than willing to engage in pragmatism in the making of accusations against Hannibal without much evidence other than… well, *belief.* Will had here pointed out that this was all well and good, but that Hannibal *had,* in fact, committed the crimes Will had accused him of. A lot of spinning in circles had taken place from this point on.)

On the whole, it had been… lovely. Just the weekend getaway he'd needed (though it hadn't been the weekend.)

Certain things had only popped into Will's head on the drive home: little small ones, such as *oh, shit, I hadn't looked at my phone even once,* or *I sure dipped without saying a single word about it,* or *I missed work without calling in sick.* Et cetera. Quite troubling stuff, really.

A deep sense of regret bloomed in his chest as he pulled up to his Wolf Trap home, surrounded by not one, not two, but *three* police cars, *Jack's personal vehicle,* and another unknown car. He felt as though he might be sick.

Following the regret and the mild nausea, Will felt a sense of… shame. He wasn't so sure whether that was evoked by the presence of the police and *Jack* or whether that would've come naturally either way, but it sure was there. And it sucked. It was quite uncomfortable, to tell you the truth.

He had half a mind to reverse out of the driveway and find another motel, but the small fact he was a man brushing his forties and not a child made him stay. The resolution to make the walk of shame up the front steps and push the door open was not so firm, and he still thought he might bolt any moment—but he was making his way inside. He gave into the strangest urge to walk softly, barely make a sound.

In his hallway, a cop. Somebody young—*thankfully*—somebody he wouldn't have met. Fresh out of the academy, maybe (or *middle school,* geez, they really take the 'teach them young' thing to heart.) Armed with a notepad and a badge bigger than she was, Will took one look at her tipped-up chin and her rolled-back shoulders and (accurately) determined they have not yet beat the false confidence out of her. Impressive.

He must have made a noise nonetheless; she turned her head, gave him a once over. "Your name, sir? Do you live here?"

Good lord.

"Will. Will Graham."

"Oh- oh, my," she made a jerky movement toward him, then a jerky movement toward the living room—impeccable reflexes, really—before finally settling onto moving into the living room. Will could hear her shrill voice above the chatter in there. "Mr Crawford? Mr Crawford!"

Will counted to three in his head before rounding the corner. Hands in his back pockets, chin slightly tipped, he really hoped he emanated appropriately guilty feelings. He took in the scene.

Molly, small and crumpled on the couch, head bowed, hands in her hair. Jack, who… but God, he looked so much *older;* every line on his face had deepened since Will's last seen him, the space under his eyes had darkened, his mouth had permanently sagged downward—from stress, from grief, from worry; from the sheer amount he carried on his shoulders.

"Will," Jack breathed, in the manner of a man who has just laid eyes on a ghost. Perhaps he has.

"Jack," Will replied carefully, tongue thick and mouth dry.

"Will?" A woman's voice rang through the room. It was not Molly's, who stared at him speechless from the couch—who has been staring wordlessly (vacantly) since he'd graced them with his presence. Lines of weariness etched across her pale face, and the deep shadows beneath her eyes matched Jack's. Will knew she had nothing to say to him. Maybe wouldn't, for a while.

The woman came from the kitchen, a frazzled air about her—though all that erratic energy seemed to seep away when she saw him. Two pairs of blue eyes locked, pairs of lips parted in silence as either took in the sight. Two ghosts of two respective pasts.

Many seconds passed before Will spoke.

“Alana?”

peacan

Chapter Notes

lets play 'spot the haunting of hill house' reference. three two one go go go

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alana?”

As the word left his lips, Will couldn't help the sense of an eerie detachment from his own voice. It resonated back at him, alien and disembodied, as if it belonged to… somebody else. He knew he’d spoken the word, the name, freed it into the world from the constrains of his mouth. It fluttered past his lips like an anxious bird; it made a round around the room, circling above their heads before departing through the window. Another silence befell them.

Alana… *settled.* That was the word Will would use to describe the barely perceptible shift which had come upon her. Alana settled in the manner of an old house—soft creaks and murmurs that reverberate through its bones, timber and brick readjusting to the subtle changes in temperature and pressure, walls leaning into each other. Rigid shoulders dropped gently into a more natural position; a tension that had gripped her body seemed to dissolve, like morning mist yielding to the warmth of the sun. She seemed to have taken a step toward Will without thinking—the surprise was clear on her face, for maybe she had anticipated to remain frozen in place instead. As it was, having found herself uprooted, she did not hesitate to come nearer still, invade his personal bubble, and do the most unthinkable thing of all.

Without a word, she wrapped her arms around him—and in doing that, Will felt the familiar contours of her frame and inhaled her perfume (rose and jasmine with hints of vanilla) and all at once, he was… he was in his living room in Wolf Trap, the living room as it had been years ago, he was in his living room in Wolf Trap as it had been years ago, and there was a hole in his chimney; the hole in his chimney that he’d put there himself in a frantic search for an animal that was not really there, an animal that he had heard inside the wall, an animal that he had heard inside his head; he was in his living room in Wolf Trap, the living room as it had been years ago, and there was a hole in his chimney and he was kissing Alana Bloom, he was kissing Alana Bloom because she *knew,* she knew as well as he that there had been no animal that night, and he desperately needed to distract her from seeing his instability so raw, so out in the open; he was in his living room in Wolf Trap, the living room as it had been years ago, and there was a hole in his chimney and he was kissing Alana Bloom because she *knew* and he was afraid and clutching for balance, clutching *her* for balance.

Alana peeled herself away from him. He was back in his living room in Wolf Trap, the living room as it was now: tidy and wrong and full of police officers he couldn’t name and a ghost or two from the past.

“Will,” she murmured, so quiet as if she might jinx it. Quiet as if she couldn’t quite believe her eyes. Quiet as if she was speaking to a frightened animal that might bolt at the drop of a hat. Quiet as if the moment might shatter at the slightest provocation.

“Hi,” he murmured back dumbly. His mouth was sandpaper, his tongue thick; all at once he felt robbed of his ability to form coherent thoughts and speak them aloud into the world—and they couldn’t *Will-Alana-Will-Alana* each other into oblivion. *Hi* was the next best thing. He was working up the courage to say something more adventurous, something like *how do you do?* or *nice weather we’re having.*

“Hey,” a small smile flittered about her lips. Her eyes were bright.

It didn’t feel right.

Oughtn’t she be upset? Outraged? Angry? Will could see for himself that he’d caused quite the stir.

And here Alana was, *Will*-ing and *Hey*-ing and smiling at him.

“Will,” a voice rumbled from the couch.

The spell was broken. Will looked past Alana.

“Jack,” he acknowledged.

“I won’t beat around the bush,” said he (Will has never been in the habit of expecting him to), “Just what was that? Three days, Will—*three*. Up and leaving without a word to your wife or anyone else, no way to get ahold of you—*just what was that*?”

Will had nothing to say to that. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the newly gloomy expression on Alana’s face. Reality must have set in, thought he spitefully. Why was he spiteful? Reality must’ve set in. This was hardly a heartfelt reunion between two friends of old, hardly was there time to sit down and catch up and fill each other in on everything the other has missed in their absence. The simple fact of the matter was: Alana was not here to rub shoulders with him, nor was Jack. They were here because Will had worried them, because Will was the sort of person to worry over, because Will had never given them a good reason not to. He’d made his proverbial bed to lie in.

Jack might have said his name—it was muted, far-away sounding—and if he had, he’d let it taper off into a question, higher in pitch: *Will?*

Will swallowed, allowing himself a moment—a short one—before the world became less fuzzy around the edges and the image of Jack sharpened back into focus. He’d gotten so much older, hadn’t he? Will had already thought that; but Jack really had aged quite a bit in these last few years. His hair had gone almost entirely grey, namely from afar—short and closely chopped, some strands appearing almost white, while others retained a deeper silver tone. It oddly matched well with the suit he wore. And the tie. And the shirt, in fact. Jack had the look about him of a man that had just stepped out of a black-and-white movie, save for the warm complexion which exonerated him from such accusations.

“I had…” Will began, and almost immediately realized just how difficult this was going to be; concocting a lie on the spot, that wasn’t so hard—that was second nature. However, momentarily, nothing too convincing was coming to mind. He was—he realized, blithely (incredulously)—blanking. “There was… well. It was my da- my father.”

“Your… father?” said Jack slowly, eyes narrow. Will couldn’t deduct, not just yet, whether Jack was simply astonished at the transparency of Will’s fib or whether he was ready to take the bait. *Be blind, Jack.*

“Yes,” Will said firmly, shoulders rolling back as he felt for purchase in this fabrication and found his footing. “There was an emergency—with my father.” There was, naturally, always the small risk of the kid—Walter—saying something *dumb,* something that would… by all accounts, poke holes in what Will had the mind to say. However, Will suspected that—on some level, to some degree—he must’ve rubbed off on the kid; Walter could tell a lie, alright. Walter knew he’d fucked up, talking to Freddie. Molly wouldn’t have been happy to hear it—oh, *no,* not Molly, who basked in ignorance. In fact—oh, and Will almost laughed aloud from relief (he’d reeled it in last second)—he was *positive* that Walter hadn’t peeped about having been the last person to have seen Will, a few days ago.

Why, this was splendid.

Will continued: “He’d- he’d fallen. Um, just down the stairs,” a triple nod from the audience, “Called me, late that night—and I had to, well, of course I had to get down there, just… help out. There’s no one else who could, of course.”

“Will, I-” Alana began, though Will had a mind to finish his story.

“My phone had already been dead when I got here, and it was all so… *chaotic,* I guess—the ER, the *everything*—that it had… slipped my mind.”

Jack exhaled loudly, scratching his head. He’d wilted a little, or so Will would describe it. Unlike Alana, who had—before—*settled.* Belief was written all over his face—but after all, who would lie about such a thing? It was entirely ludicrous to think about it, even entertain the idea momentarily. “How is he, then? Your father?” asked Jack gruffly.

“He’s better,” Will nodded, thumbs hooked into the beltloops of his trousers as he assumed a (mostly) relaxed stance, “not bedbound, thankfully. Out and about already, maybe the second I’d left the house,” he added, with a convincing little chuckle which had two of the three listeners chuckling as well, “Mostly he’d only gotten himself a bit beat up. Bruised. He’ll be fine.”

“Well,” Jack smacked his lips—a tell he was feeling mighty out of his depth, awkward, “Glad to hear it.”

“Yeah. Right,” Will agreed.

Hannibal walked into the room.

He held himself as though he commanded the room. If he were there, he would have. No—if others could see him, he would have. He was as tall and imposing as ever, self-assured to boot; magnetism rolled off of him in waves, though it could only wash over Will—over Will, who couldn't tear his eyes away.

If others could see him, the atmosphere would have changed. It would have changed from this uncomfortable, gloomy silence to… to whatever Hannibal would see it fit to become. He would, with his uncanny ability to do so, read the room both flawlessly and effortlessly, so keenly perceptive. He would say something, and whatever that might end up being, would resonate with his company—though any words spoken in that rich baritone would, doubtless, sway. They have, always. Will has seen it for himself. Felt it for himself.

Though Hannibal needn't rely on the pleasant quality of his voice or his domineering presence. Following this pleasant line of thought, Will gave into the temptation to prolong the fantasy; suddenly, they were no longer in his living room in Wolf Trap. Around him, out of nowhere and out of nothing, bloomed an opera house. A beautiful, decadent opera house—and this was its grand foyer. It was all high ceilings with intricate moldings, crystal chandeliers hanging from above, and polished marble floors underfoot. Will watched Hannibal still. He knew, he *knew,* what Hannibal would do.

He would proceed to engage others in polite conversation—light and pleasant in nature, noncommittal, but—still—worthy of being had; he would speak with purpose and eloquence, he would weave narratives that left spellbound. He would pepper in a joke or two, never overly crass yet still tittering on the verge of just scandalous enough to cause the other party to erupt in a shocked laughter or snicker quietly to themselves, privately pleased about having made a good enough impression to have brought out the doctor's *devilish* side. Then they would walk away with a head full of him, and they would spend all their life wondering what they might do as to be extended an invitation to one of the doctor's famous dinner parties, and they would despair when an invitation never came after all, and they would wonder what had gone wrong that fine evening at that decadent opera house, and suddenly their recollection of a joke well told would turn into the memory of a crude jest that should not have been spoken in polite company, not least that of Dr Lecter, and a small snide comment about a fellow opera goer would turn into abhorrent gossip and—oh!—how had they managed to make such a fool of themselves? They ought to hang themselves off the turret on the tower of their house—which, being wealthy (as are the patrons of that decadent opera house) and having a house with a tower and a turret (as do the patrons of that decadent opera house), there would be no other proper place to hang themselves of.

Will stepped out of the decadent opera house, past the hanging body of an unfortunate wealthy patron, and stepped into his living room in Wolf Trap, where Hannibal had walked into mere moments ago.

Hannibal was beautiful.

That was a finished thought. Will had no more to say on the matter, even though his imagination had of late become rather… overzealous. Certainly he could expand upon this, he could consider the way the light from the window hit the doctor just right to brighten his eyes, and he could note the pleasant smile about his lips, and he could even wax poetic about

the clean lines of his face and the sharpness of his cheekbones—Will could do all this, and more, and then he could recall that thoughts along these lines ought to be upsetting and of unfavorable nature; honestly, it was not so long ago that the notion of seeing Hannibal in this light was not only repugnant, it was terrifying. To the bone.

But what good did it do him? None, none at all, truthfully.

So Will allowed the thought to anchor itself in the forefront of his mind, allowed his eyes to roam. Hannibal was beautiful; the thought punched the air out of his lungs. Hannibal was beautiful; how terrifying—how *beautiful.*

His rear hit a soft cushion—his armchair, from the looks of things. There was a hand on his shoulder, a hand that had pressed him gently into the seat. Roses, jasmine, a hint of vanilla.

"Alana?"

"You'd… spaced out, I think," she turned her head, sneaking a glance at Jack. Molly was also there, which did not seem to matter so far and most likely would not start mattering anytime soon, though it must be said that Molly was still, in fact, there. "Maybe a glass of water?"

"Yeah," Will agreed easily. Come to think of it, it would be nice. "Please."

Footsteps, some shuffling—Jack? Not much longer after the fact, a cold glass was pressed into his hand. He drank it, almost whole, in one go. He was wet. Damp, all over. A bead of sweat travelled down from his hairline, traversing the expanse of his cheek, braving the thick of his beard, and settling upon the corner of his lip. Will licked it away; salty.

Hannibal was crouching before him. Will smiled easily.

"You mustn't waver, Will," Hannibal offered, cryptically and quite unhelpfully.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Will quirked an eyebrow.

"What's what supposed to mean?" Alana tilted her head at him, above him.

Will stiffened. It was—nothing, nothing really; he could lie it away, he had only said a small thing—but he had said *something,* around someone he ought not to have said it around. A strange sort of anxious cold settled about him. "Nothing," he smiled, halfhearted and apologetic, "Nothing in the least, I- I'd only had a thought. It's not important."

Alana offered a small smile, though it betrayed her concern.

Jack and Alana did not stay much longer after that. With them also left that entourage of officers. The air in the house was suddenly crisper, easier to inhale and push down the trachea. Will marveled at the change; he took deep breaths on the way to the kitchen. (His stomach demanded *actual* food.)

Being that the kitchen had an open view of the living room, and being—as well—that Will was positioned just so, he watched Molly's figure on the couch. She was more a sculpture of wax than a woman, sitting in eerie stillness. A dirty-pink blanket lay strewn over her

shoulders, though one of her arms was uncovered; it had not been so when Will had arrived. She must not have cared to fix it whenever it had happened.

Will's eyes fell from the blanket to Molly's chest, where they remained fixed for a moment—observing with great interest the slow, barely perceptible movement of it. She breathed slowly, shallowly. She did not move, even when Will dropped the knife he'd been using to dice meat and it clattered noisily against the tiles. The sound, sudden and piercing and tremendously loud in the stubborn silence of the house, startled the dogs that had (customarily) gathered around Will once they'd realized food was being prepared. Molly, however, unflinchingly warmed that spot on the couch.

By the time Will had whipped up the meal (something involving sausages and pepper), he realized he only had half a portion for himself—which, as well, was his own fault. He ought to know better than to fall for the begging, the wide puppy-eyes (literally) and the quiet whining and the pitter-patter of impatient paws against the tile. A bit of sausage here, a bit of there, a bit to you and a bit to him and a bit to her—and next to nothing for Will. Well, not quite *next to nothing*; about half.

Even so, despite the apparent inconvenience, it evoked a strange sort of happiness. He hadn't really done this, had he, in a long while? He hadn't really treated the dogs as… *equals,* maybe, or he hadn't, at least, spoiled them—in a long while. It felt good. It felt familiar. He eyed the space in the living room, the section of the floor, where his mattress used to lay.

The word wistful came to mind.

-

Will sat on the edge of the bed, shoulders slightly hunched and head bowed. His hands clutched the phone—his phone—and the light which emanated from its screen was momentarily the only light in the bedroom which was so engulfed in darkness; the overcast night had concealed the moon and the stars, and though the curtains were drawn (and the window itself opened), no natural light could hope to come through.

Will's face was the only part of him lit up by the artificial, bluish light. It gave his skin a sort of ghostly pallor, it made the furrow of his brow more pronounced. Shadows stretched and swayed in response to the gentle flickers of the screen. His eyes glistened. Chiaroscuro.

His fingers tapped the screen intermittently; composing a reply, erasing it, typing out something else entirely, furiously pressing backspace once more.

The source of this… this *silliness,* really, was a small little message that had arrived a little before bedtime—some half an hour ago.

Unknown number. 'Hey, it was really nice to see you today. I'd love to speak with you again sometime soon. Call me, or text back, if that's agreeable with you :) -Alana.'

It *had been* nice to see Alana today. That was, easily, the worst thing about all this. It *had been* nice. Alana was an old friend. For a time, there had been none beside her. Still,

Hannibal's words played in his mind—the convergence of past and present, what good would it do him? In fact, it had every potential to undo a lot without improving much.

But it was *Alana.*

Seeing her was nothing like stumbling upon Zeller or sensing the oppressive presence of Freddie. She wasn't a cut-off coworker or an absolute menace of a reporter. She'd come to Will's house, *worried,* of all things—because she cared; she cared in a way that was less superficial than Jack, in a way that felt distinctly different than Molly, in a way that way much more real and tangible than Hannibal. Alana had only ever wanted the best for him, hadn't she? He ought to see her.

'Yeah I'm down. You free this week?' A shaky finger squashing the *send* button. Timestamped at 23:57.

Will tossed the phone away—it landed with a soft thump, perhaps onto the pile of clothing beside the bed—and let his body collapse to the mattress. He was alone. How strange.

Molly and Walter had gone, earlier that evening. They'd gone to Molly's parents. She hadn't said much about the entire ordeal, and Will hadn't asked much in turn. It seemed an almost obvious move on her part. Will might've been shocked if she hadn't left for a little while.

He was alone. How strange.

The quiet of the bedroom was stifling, as was the perpetual, unyielding darkness. He'd never slept here alone; indeed, the bedroom served no purpose before Molly had entered his life. He knew not how to sleep in this bed—this bed which was suddenly *wrong,* very wrong; the mattress was too firm and the sheet was too thin and the covers were too thick and the pillow was too soft. Nothing felt right. The room turned hostile. It wanted him out, though no more than Will himself needed to *leave,* like, right now.

And though he was alone, he quietly creeped through the hallways, one hand always touching the walls so as to offer a certain measure of security. He wasn't exactly groping blindly through the dark (knowing this place like the back of his hand), though it was damn close to it. The stairs creaked beneath his feet. Shutters, somewhere in another room, clattered loudly against the side of the house.

An exercise in vulnerability.

Floorboards groaned as he landed onto solider ground.

Curtains rustled nearby.

Near the downstairs bathroom, soft, percussive taps emanated from the piping.

Inexplicably, it felt as if the very walls of the house whispered to him. Will struggled to grasp this, this thought which defied reason entirely. Ludicrous, he thought, yet the house's murmurings persisted, permeating the quiet night. In this hour when the world hushed, Will's house spoke freely, and he lent its whispers a willing ear.

He understood—of course, he understood: the diminished ambient noise, the heightened sensitivity of the senses, the primal instinct lurking in the shadows—all was amplified in these conditions. He *understood,* of course—but this hardly mattered now.

As he continued to navigate through the shadowy labyrinth of his home, guided by the sounds and sensations he had come to rely on, eventually he arrived to his destination. The dogs had stirred already, doubtless having heard him trudging around upstairs.

There, in the obscurity, he could make out their shapes, ghostly figures that blended with the shadows. Their tails thumped in subdued joy, and their soft breaths formed little clouds of mist in the cold air of the house. Will sank to his knees, his fingers finding their fur, their wet noses finding the little hollows in his flanks, the soft part of his stomach.

The room itself seemed to shift and settle, as if the house approved of this little midnight rendezvous. Will had, at some point, unwittingly ended up lying sprawled across the carpet; the dogs had nestled around him, cocooning him entirely. Though the ground beneath his back was hard (despite the carpet's best efforts) and though the floor of one's living room was no place to spend a night (at least, no place to spend a night and expect a decent sleep), Will couldn't quite bring himself to care. Not when his eyelids suddenly felt so heavy and the strong (to some, repulsive—but not him) smell of *dog* soothed his otherwise, perpetually frayed nerves.

-

They were meeting up at a small café near Alana's workplace—a certain place which shan't be named for the moment. Supposedly it's only recently opened up—and thus, though the coffee and service was great (as she alleged), it still wanted for traffic. Alana was something of a regular, as were a handful of her colleagues. As Will walked inside (slightly disheveled but at least well-dressed), he understood why. He could see the appeal. The area was bathed in the soft, warm glow of vintage Edison bulbs hanging from the ceiling, which cast a gentle glow over the wooden tables and fashionably mismatched chairs. Altogether quite cozy.

His eyes darted around the room as he scanned for a familiar face, eventually landing on Alana who'd taken a table for two in one of the corners. She hadn't noticed him, Will took the liberty to observe. Then, he continued taking the liberty to observe *her.* He hadn't had the chance yet, not really. He hadn't been… well, when she'd shown up at his house some days ago, he hadn't really prioritized such a thing.

Flowing chestnut hair cascaded over her shoulders in soft waves, dark and contrasting against her pale face. There was a glow about it, about her, so much unlike the gloomy aura of Jack; Alana seemed to have taken the last years in stride, unmarred by the stress of her profession and her past. Even now, she radiated a sort of quiet confidence. Delicate silver jewelry adorned her neck and fingers—namely, her ring finger. Interesting.

In the interest of not loitering around the entrance like a freak, Will approached the table. A smile split her face in two as he came into view. Her body jerked in a sort of peculiar way, and she extended a hand out; she must have wanted to stand and perhaps bestow him with another hug, before reigning herself in. Right—a little by little, like approaching a skittish horse. *Good call, Alana.*

“Hey,” Will smiled shortly before plunking into the chair across her.

“Will, hey,” Alana couldn’t wipe the excitement from her face, any attempts of subduing it utterly failing. Awfully transparent. “I’m- I’m glad you came.”

“I did say I’d come,” Will chuckled half-heartedly. Just then, a waitress approached—a pretty young thing with a blindingly bright attitude. Will took his coffee black, Alana with milk. “It’s… ah, glad you made time for me.”

“*Glad I*—? Don’t be ridiculous, Will,” she laughed a little, “First time I’ve a chance to see you in three years, there’s nothing that could’ve stopped me from making time. You must know this.”

“Wow, three years, hm?” Will nodded slowly. Three, indeed—*nearly* three. “Time just flies, doesn’t it?”

“Depends, I guess,” she chuckled, “Has it flown for you?”

He contemplated this. “No, I don’t suppose so. I don’t know why I said it. Three years is an awfully long time.”

“Tell me, then,” Alana, tone forcefully lighter, seemingly adamant on keeping things on a semi-positive note, started, “You’re a married man, settled down—a father, no less.”

“Step father,” Will interjected.

She gave him a faux-chiding look, “*Step* father, then. Do you… well- I suppose I sort of mean to ask—and, why, I see now that it’ll sound a lot more severe than I’d intended it to,” she chuckled, “But- I’d… I’d really have liked it if you’d found some happiness, Will, when you left…” (*Us? Me? This place? Him?*) “When you left.” (Period.) “Are you happy?”

A sort of chill gently slithered up his forearms, though died down around his shoulders. It wasn’t a hard question. It was very straightforward—even though the answer was… *complicated* at best. There was no reason to delve into the complexity, however, of it all. There was no reason to trouble Alana any more than he already had a couple of days ago. One syllable would do. Just the one. Three letters. *Y-e-s*. “Yes,” he said, managing to sound like the word hadn’t caught in his throat, “Yes, I suppose I am.”

Alana smiled again—though it was different this time. Her lips curled upwards softly, tenderly; the lines around her eyes deepened. She radiated a sort of genuine, heartwarming affection. Will had *no* clue what to do with it; it was—well, it was a lot. Instinct said to cower, look down at the steaming mug of coffee (when had that shown up?), deflect and evade until the offending, unbearable look was replaced with something he could shoulder.

That seemed unfair. Even by his standards.

So—he braved Alana’s scrutiny and her warm smile, despite the overwhelming urge to curl away. He stared at her eyebrows—he should have taken his glasses along.

He had to change the subject.

“So,” his eyes tactfully flickered down to the ring on her hand, “Margot?”

Alana—bless her—seemed thrilled to have been asked; though her joy was much more manageable in this case.

She told Will all about it.

All about the wedding, which he’d missed on account of his personally tailored reclusion, all about the son that had been born some year ago now, all about their life together. Alana seemed to have spoken for what felt like some fifteen, twenty minutes. Will was the perfect conversation partner during that time; he let an intrigued sort of expression etch itself into his features, he nodded approximately ever thirty-five to fifty seconds (or when Alana said something especially emphatically), he asked polite questions at appropriate points in the story, and—really—he patted himself on the proverbial back for letting this glide so smoothly. In fact, it seemed that Alana had forgotten all about grilling Will about *his* life.

Mostly.

She did ask a handful of questions—though they erred on the side of broad and if a little vague, which Will suspected was rather purposeful. Still, looking at a gift horse’s mouth and all that.

“I’m surprised you hadn’t moved, to be perfectly honest with you,” she said, at a point, stirring what was left of her coffee absentmindedly, “With how you’d… well, you know, with how you’d isolated yourself—from us, mostly (which, by the way, I totally understand)—I was sure we’d seen the last of you,” she chuckled softly, if a little sadly. Will stiffened somewhat; they were dangerously close to an emotional, heartfelt conversation, “I’m glad you’re here, don’t get me wrong. I truly am.”

Will cleared his throat softly, “I wasn’t sure—then, I mean—I wasn’t sure what I’d do with myself, really,” he pushed his cup about the table, now unabashedly recoiling from eye-contact, “I, uh… I drove around for a while. Stumbled upon my current workplace like that, by the way—maybe *current* is presumptuous, I haven’t really been good about coming in recently—and I guess that’s why I stayed. Couldn’t think of a good reason to move elsewhere within the same area.”

“I don’t think you’d say what you did for a living just yet,” she prompted gently.

“Oh,” Will supposed that was fair, he hadn’t—though he’d expected Alana to have read all about him *fixing boats and stuff* in Freddie’s newest article. Perhaps she hadn’t. Perhaps she had and she was only endeavoring to be polite, who could say? “I’m—I was—a mechanic. A boat mechanic.”

“Oh,” her eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah,” he cringed slightly; never a fan of divulging the past, “It’s- well, it’s what my dad used to do, so I know a thing or two. Worked out quite well in the end, it was a good little gig for me. Shame to see it go.”

Alana's expression softened again. "I understand. Nice while it lasted, yeah?"

"Yeah," Will agreed.

"I also thought-" Alana began, though was cut off by the ringing of her own phone. The device blared its default ringtone loudly while she ruffled through the bag, perhaps flustered to have disturbed the peaceful atmosphere of the café. She pressed it to her ear after glancing at the screen. "Jack, yes, it's me. I'm here—well, I'm across the street. Yes, with Will. Yes." Her brows furrowed suddenly, "What, now? Right. Okay. I'll see what I can do. Catch you later."

Will swallowed, matching her worried expression. "… everything alright?"

She looked at him apologetically. "Yes. No. Sort of. Maybe. It's… *him*—in a way."

Him. Alana did not need to specify further. Another round of chills raced up Will's spine, rattling each vertebra on their way. *Him.*

She must have noticed the rather haunted expression about his face.

"We don't have to talk about him," she assured quickly, apologetically, "It's- I'm sorry I even mentioned it. I'm afraid I'll have to cut our outing short, however."

A flurry of thoughts sped through Will's head as he stared blankly at her, not quite comprehending. Mostly on account of the fact he wasn't really listening, couldn't really listen —more accurately, maybe, couldn't really *hear.* His breathing was sort of short, sort of rapid. *Him.* The Hannibal who did not haunt the rooms of his house, who did not care to pester Will until he was at his wits' end, who did not say things both infuriating and thoughtful, who did not love Will. Not… not in the same way. Not in the way Will was used to. Not in the way Will had imagined—had been imagining for many months. The flesh and blood Hannibal who was, despite Will's best efforts to picture the contrary, very alive. And very close.

They left the café together. If Will had said anything—he must have—he could not recall. If Alana had said anything—she must have—Will could not recall. As he moved through the familiar surroundings on the way home, a disquieting sensation washed over him like a tide. His steps felt detached. Each movement was sluggish, a mechanical response to the world around him. His surroundings blurred into a surreal, dreamlike landscape and in it he found himself adrift in a sea of disconnected thoughts and disconnected senses. Nothing felt quite real. He wished Hannibal—*his* Hannibal—would show; though his wish, for now, remained unfulfilled. In fact, he'd been gone for quite some time, hadn't he? Days, really.

For all intents and purposes, Will did not return to an empty house that day—the dogs' mere existence, as ever, made sure of that. Yet for all the world, it felt emptier than ever. A gaping, aching hole where a home ought to be.

Chapter End Notes

this fic is at the moment on a (short) hiatus due to the recent passing of my best friend. blood, drying is a project that i am immensely proud of, both conceptually and in my dedication to it. due to this, i do not want to risk my overwhelming grief affecting the quality of my writing or the quality of my plot-planning, nor do i wish for it to seep into the text itself. i hope you all understand!

that said there is absolutely no way in hell i'm abandoning this project—it only might take a little while longer than i'd originally anticipated.

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